

1963

MID-YEAR

EDITION

VOLUME 5

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ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY

1963 MID-YEAR EDITION

Edited by

ELLERY QUEEN

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Editors' Note

Dear Reader:

It is remarkable how *EQMM*'s annual paperback anthologies have acquired a kind of triple-identity—what might be called a technique of threeness, a trichotomy of readership appeal.

First, there is the triangular nature of the length of the stories. In a perfectly natural evolution, the stories have fallen into three groups: short novels, novelettes, and short stories—a length to please every 'tec taste—or, as we said last year, short novels for long nights, novelettes for short evenings, and short stories for betweentimes . . .

Second, there is the triangular nature of the basic types of stories. Again, in a perfectly natural development, the contents of each anthology have divided into three parts: detection, crime, and suspense. And it is extraordinary how many stories, in an almost equilateral sense, combine all three types—detectives (amateur or official) investigating crimes (major or minor), with action (physical or mental) and suspense (edge-of-the-chair or fingernail-biting) on every page . . .

Third, there is the tripartite nature of the characters-and-authors. First, stories about famous series characters—criminologists and criminals—such as those included in this volume:

Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe
Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey
T. S. Stribling's Professor Poggoli
Melville Davisson Post's Uncle Abner
Lord Dunsany's Mr. Linley
Roy Vickers' Fidelity Dove
Ellery Queen's E.Q.

Next, stories by famous mystery writers, but not about well-known series characters—and in this important classification the present anthology offers:

Erle Stanley Gardner
John Dickson Carr
Cornell Woolrich
Eric Ambler
Charlotte Armstrong
Anthony Boucher
Francis Iles (Anthony Berkeley)

And third, stories of crime, detection, and suspense written by famous literary figures—of whom we present in this book:

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O. Henry
T. S. Stribling

Thus, as before, the best of the best, the best by the best, and in the best forms . . .

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ELLERY QUEEN

P.S.: And for extra measure, one more threesome: (1) every story selected for this anthology must meet the 22-year-old standard of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* for high quality or high professionalism of writing; (2) every story must meet *EQMM's* 22-year-old standard for originality or superior craftsmanship in plotting; and (3) as in the four preceding paperback anthologies, not a single story in this volume has ever appeared in any collection previously edited by Ellery Queen.



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John Dickson Carr

The Clue of the Red Wig

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THEY USUALLY PUT THE PAPER TO press at two a.m. MacGrath, the news editor, who was not feeling well after the Christmas celebrations, went home early to his own bed and left things at the office to young Patterson. MacGrath was sleeping a shivering sleep when the telephone at his bedside rang.

MacGrath made unearthly noises, like a ghost roused before midnight. But he answered the 'phone.

"Hazel Loring?" he repeated. "What about her?"

"She's dead," answered Patterson. "Murdered, it's pretty certain. Do you know Victoria Square?"

"No."

"It's a quiet little residential square in Bayswater. Hazel Loring lived there. In the middle of the square there's a garden reserved for the use of residents. About eleven o'clock a policeman on his rounds found Hazel Loring dead in the

garden with practically no clothes on—"

"What?" shouted MacGrath; and the sleep was struck from his eyes.

"Well, only a brassiere and a pair of step-ins. She was sitting on a bench, dead as Cleopatra, with the rest of her clothes folded up on the bench beside her."

"In *this* weather?"

"Yes. The policeman saw her go into the garden an hour before. Cause of death was a fractured skull, from several blows with a walking-stick whose handle was loaded with lead. Signs of a struggle behind the bench."

"Right!" said MacGrath. "Splash it on the front page. Every woman in the land will want to know what happened to Hazel Loring!"

Everybody knew the name of Hazel Loring, the face of Hazel Loring, the opinions of Hazel Loring. "Smile and Grow Fit" was the title of her weekly column in the *Daily Banner*, a deadly rival of

MacGrath's own *Daily Record*. "Smile and Grow Fit" was also the title of the booklets, sold by the thousand, in which she explained to housewives how they might keep slim without anguish. She was no grim task-mistress of health. She did not sternly order them to eat a dry biscuit, and like it.

"I've devised these exercises on the advice of a doctor," she wrote. "Just three minutes each morning; and don't bother any more about it. If you like chocolates, in heaven's name eat chocolates. Only mind you do my exercises: and then eat what you like."

Her chatty, intimate manner warmed their hearts. She became more than an adviser on health. She counselled them about love and hats and husbands. Everybody had seen pictures of the strong, square, pleasant face, showing fine teeth in a smile, and with a dimple at each corner of the mouth. She was slim, with a good figure, and intensely active. She was well dressed, but not offensively so. Her brown hair was bobbed, her brown eyes grave. Her age might have been thirty-five. Thousands felt that they knew her personally, and wrote to tell her so.

Yet somebody killed her, half-dressed, in a public garden on a bitter December night.

If truth must be told; even in MacGrath, hard-boiled as he was, the first reaction was a twinge of pity; his wife was more emphatic.

"Poor woman!" said Mrs. MacGrath from the opposite bed. "Poor woman!"

"Ho? Is that how it strikes you?" asked MacGrath, his news-sense instantly on the alert.

"Of course it is. Of all the brutal, senseless—!"

"Then that's how we'll play the story. I think I'm getting an inspiration. But Hazel Loring. Oh Lord!"

The next day he carried his inspiration to Houston, the managing editor.

The offices of the *Daily Record* occupy a huge modernistic building, a sort of chromium-plated goldfish bowl. Fleet Street was buzzing with gossip. The murder of Hazel Loring, though they could not yet call it a murder, was considered so important that they held a conference in the managing editor's office. Here, in a cubist-designed room with bright curtains, the stately Houston sat behind a desk topped with black glass, and drew down the corners of his mouth.

"Impossible," Houston said. "We can't do it. Dignity."

"All right. Be dignified," said MacGrath. "But don't pass up a thing like this. Now see here, J. H. This is a woman's crime; it oozes feminine interest. It's good for a daily story. Our-Correspondent-Watches-Police; Developments-Day-By-Day. So, with half the women in England crying for news

of their favorite, what do we do? Why, we put a woman to cover it."

Houston passed a hand over his thin, high forehead.

"A woman doing police reporting?"

"Why not? She can be dignified, can't she? Womanly and kind, with a touch of sadness? Man, they'll eat it up!"

Houston hunched up his shoulders. "She'd have to be tough," he pointed out. "Covering a war is one thing; covering a murder is another. I don't know who I could assign to it."

"What about that French girl? Jacqueline Dubois. Only been with us a week. Came over when things there went to blazes. But I'll tell you something, J. H. She had the reputation of being the smartest news-hawk in Paris; Richart of *L'Oeil* recommended her in superlatives, and I think he's right."

"She speaks English?"

"She's half English. Her mother was a Cockney. She speaks English all right."

"And she will be—er—dignified?"

"Absolutely. I guarantee it, J. H."

"Get her," said Houston.

Nevertheless, he was uneasy until he actually set eyes on Jacqueline Dubois. Then he drew a breath of relief, and almost beamed.

MacGrath, on the other hand, was jarred. In recommending this girl MacGrath had been acting on a hunch; he knew little about her

beyond Richart's word. And, at his first sight of Jacqueline, he had a panicky feeling that Richart must have been indulging in a deplorable Gallic sense of humour.

Jacqueline entered the office so timidly that Houston rose to draw out a chair for her. She was a golden blonde, small and plump, with one of those fair skins which flush easily, and those dark-blue eyes which are either wide open or modestly lowered. Her mouth expressed confusion, but anxiety to please. Her fur coat was good but unobtrusive; from her plain grey dress to her tan stockings and shoes she was trim and yet retiring. She kept her big eyes fixed on Houston except when he looked directly at her. In a soft, sweet voice she hesitantly asked what was wanted.

While MacGrath stood in despair, Houston told her.

"And that's the idea, Miss Dubois. Your purpose is to—"

"To pester the police," groaned MacGrath.

"To print," said Houston sternly, "all desirable news which will be of interest to our public. Would you like the assignment?"

Jacqueline raised her limpid blue eyes.

"Would I like it?" she breathed. "Hot ziggety damn!"

Houston sat back with a start. She was covered in confusion, modesty struggling with gratitude.

"I thank you on my knees," she

went on, clasping her hands together. "Miss Loring. The poor lady who has so unfortunately kicked the ghost. I had wished to cover that story, yes; but, blimey; I never thought I should get it. Oh, you are a dear. Would you like me to kiss you?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Houston.

But Jacqueline was not listening. She was utterly absorbed. The toe of her shoe tapped the carpet. Her eyes were turned inwards, a pucker of concentration between the brows; and, as she reflected, she nodded to herself.

"I am handicap," she confessed. "I am new to England and I do not know the ropes yet. If I get you a scoop, I must get it funny-ways. Who is the head of your whole police department?"

"The Assistant Commissioner for the Criminal Investigation Department," said MacGrath.

"Good!" said Jacqueline briskly. "I make love to him."

Houston gave her a long, slow look.

"No, no, no!" he said.

"Yes, yes, yes!" said Jacqueline, continuing to nod briskly.

"But you can't do that, Miss Dubois!"

"I do not understand," complained Jacqueline, breaking off to look at him with shy astonishment. "You do not wish me to do it? Why?"

"To explain that fully, Miss Du-

bois, might take a long time. I can sum up by saying that it would hardly be in accord with the policy of this newspaper. Besides, there are—er—practical considerations. In the first place, you'd never get near him. In the second place, even if you did you wouldn't get any story."

A twinkle appeared in Jacqueline's limpid eyes.

"Ha, ha, ha," she said. "That is what they tell me when I make eyes at Mornay, the *juge d'instruction*. He has whiskers this long"—her gesture indicated a beard of improbable dimensions—"but I get from him the official photographs of De La Rive shooting at all the gendarmes in the rue Jean Goujoun, and I scoop the town! Still, if you do not wish it?"

"Definitely not."

Jacqueline sighed. "Orright," she conceded. "Then I must find out the name of the policeman in charge of the case, and make love to *him*. Also, please, I should like a newspaper photographer to go with me all the time."

"A photographer? Why?"

"First because it is practical. I have got some fine pictures when I work for *L'Oeil*. Once I get a picture of the Comtesse de la Tour St. Sulpice, which is a kleptomaniac, pinching a necklace out of Paulier's in the rue de la Paix."

"Is that so?"

"Oo la la, what a sensation!" She gurgled delightedly. "Then too it

is useful if you can get a picture of a police-officer doing something he should not. You tell him you will publish the picture unless he gives you a story."

Houston had been listening under a kind of hypnosis. Jacqueline seemed to be surrounded by a rose-leaf cloud of innocence, like a figure on a valentine. He could not have been more startled if the Mona Lisa had suddenly leaned out of her frame and put out her tongue at him. He found his voice.

"We begin with vamping and pass on to blackmail," he said. "MacGrath, I can't do it. Young woman, you're fired! You'd ruin this paper in a week."

"If she's fired," roared MacGrath, "I resign. Splendor of saints, here's a newspaperman at last!"

"Do you want the Home Office to put us out of business?"

"We've got sub-editors to read her copy, haven't we? I tell you, J. H., if—"

"Then there is another thing," pursued Jacqueline timidly. "One of your photographers is called Henry Ashwin. He is a good fellow, though I think he drink too much visky-soda. He is the photographer I want, please."

"Ashwin? Why Ashwin?"

"I find out he is making the goo-goo eyes at Hazel Loring's maid-servant. Yes! That is something the others pass up, eh? So I give him visky-soda and I talk to him. Already I get much information,

you see."

"Before you were assigned to the story?"

Jacqueline raised her eyebrows.

"But yes, yes, yes! Of course. Listen! This Miss Loring, her age is thirty-five. In private life she is very bad-tempered. Henry Ashwin thinks she is what you call a phoney, somehow, but he is not sure about what. Also she is good-goody, what you call a prude. Is she married? No! But she has a *fiancé*, a lawyer which is called Edward Hoyt; and he hang about her for five years and still it is no soap. Why does she not marry him, eh?"

"Well?"

"I find out," answered Jacqueline simply. "Now I tell you something the police have not told you."

"Go on," muttered Houston, still hypnotized.

"This is what her maid say to Henry Ashwin, and Henry Ashwin say to me. When Miss Loring is found sitting on the bench in that garden, wearing only the brassiere and the step-ins and her shoes, the other clothes are folded up on the bench beside her."

MacGrath was instantly alert. "We know that. It's in all the papers."

"Yes! *But*," said Jacqueline, "there are other things too. Folded up in the clothes (so) there is a red wig and a pair of dark spectacles."

Houston and MacGrath stared at each other, wondering whether

this might be some obscure French metaphor. But Jacqueline left them in no doubt.

"A red wig," she insisted, tapping her golden hair. "And the smoky spectacles you look through." She cupped her hands over her eyes in mimicry. "Why should Miss Loring have them, eh? Blimey but that is not all! It is certain she undressed herself, and was not undressed by anybody. Her maid tells Henry Ashwin that Miss Loring has a special way of folding stockings, like . . . ah, zut! . . . would you like me to take off mine and show you?"

"No, no!"

"Orright. I only ask. But it is special. Also the way of folding the dress. So she take her own dress off, and she have a wig and spectacles. Please, will let me find out why?" Her big blue eyes turned reproachfully on Houston. "You say you will fire me, and that is not nice. I know I am a goofy little beasel; that is what they all say in Paris; but if you will please be a nice man and give me a chance I will get you that story, cross my heart. Yes?"

Houston had the darkest misgivings. But he was a journalist.

"Hop to it," he said.

Inspector Adam Bell, Criminal Investigation Department, stood in the prim little front parlor of number 22 Victoria Square. He looked alternately out of the window, to-

wards the garden in the center, and then back to the white-faced man opposite him.

Sedate and dun-colored was Victoria Square, Bayswater, in the bleak winter afternoon. The house-fronts were sealed up. In the garden, surrounded by teeth of spiked iron railings, the branches of trees showed black and knotted against a muddy twilight; its gravel paths wound between iron benches and skeleton bushes, on grass hard with frost.

Inspector Bell, in the white, anti-septic front parlor of the dead woman's house, faced Hazel Loring's *fiancé*. Inspector Bell was a young and very serious-minded product of Hendon, but his sympathetic manner had already done much.

"And you can't tell me anything more, Mr. Hoyt?"

"Nothing!" said Edward Hoyt, and fingered his black tie. "I wanted to take her to a concert last night, but she refused, and I went alone. I—er—don't read the sensational press. So I knew nothing about this business until Hazel's secretary, Miss Alice Farmer, telephoned me this morning."

Inspector Bell shared Hoyt's views about the sensational press: the house was triple-guarded against reporters, though a hundred eyes came to stop and stare in the square.

Edward Hoyt suddenly sat down beside the small fire in the

white grate. He was a long, lean, pleasant-faced man of just past forty, with big knuckly hands and a patient manner. He had certainly, Bell reflected, been a patient suitor. His eyes in the firelight were faintly bloodshot, and he turned them often towards a sofa on which lay a neat wig, a pair of dark spectacles, and a heavy blackthorn walking-stick.

"It's fantastic and degrading," he went on, "and I still don't believe it. Can't *you* tell me anything, Inspector? Anything at all?"

Bell was non-committal.

"You've heard the evidence, sir. Miss Farmer, her secretary, testifies that at a few minutes before ten last night Miss Loring left the house, refusing to say where she was going." He paused. "It wasn't the first time Miss Loring had gone out like that: always about ten o'clock, and usually staying out two or three hours."

Hoyt did not comment.

"From here," said Bell, "she must have gone straight across to the garden—"

"But why, in heaven's name," Hoyt burst out, "the garden?"

Bell ignored this. "A policeman on his rounds heard someone fumbling at the gate of the garden. He flashed his light, and saw Miss Loring opening the gate with a key. He questioned her, but she said she lived in the square and had a right to use the garden, even on a blacked-out December night.

"The constable let her go. But he was worried. About an hour later, his beat brought him round to the garden again. The gate was still open: he heard it creak. He went in, and found Miss Loring sitting on a bench . . . there . . . at the first turn of the gravel path, about fifteen feet from the gate."

Bell paused.

He visualized the scene, sharp in its loneliness. The gate squeaking in a raw wind; the brief, probing light on icy flesh and white silk underclothing; the head hanging down over the back of the bench; and the high-heeled shoes with button-fastenings undone.

"The rest of her clothing—fur coat, dress, suspender-belt, and stockings—lay beside her: folded in such a way that her maid, Henrietta Simms, swears she took off the clothes herself. Her handbag was untouched. The key to the garden gate, with a large cardboard label attached, lay on the path."

Each time Bell made a statement, Edward Hoyt nodded at the fire.

Bell went over to the sofa and picked up the walking-stick. It was top-heavy, because its nickel-plated head contained half a pound of lead.

"She'd been killed," Bell went on, "behind that bench. The ground was hard, but there were prints of those high heels of hers all over the place. There'd been a struggle: she wasn't any weakling."

"No," agreed Hoyt.

"Her skull was fractured over the left temple with this stick." Bell weighed it in his hand. "No doubt about this as the weapon. Microscopic traces of blood, and a hair, on the handle: though the wound hardly bled at all outwardly. Our laboratory identifies—"

He broke off apologetically.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I'm not trying to give you the third degree with this. I only brought it along to see whether anybody could identify it."

Hoyt spoke with old-fashioned courtesy.

"And I beg *your* pardon, Inspector. It is a pleasure to deal with a gentleman." He got to his feet, and drew the back of his hand across his mouth. "I'm glad there was no blood," he added. "I'm glad she wasn't—knocked about."

"Yes."

"But is that reasonable, Inspector? A fatal injury, with so little blood?"

"Oh yes. It's the rupture of brain-tissues that counts. A friend of mine got concussion from being struck by the door of a railway carriage and never knew there was anything wrong with him until he collapsed." Bell's tone changed; he spoke sharply. "Now, sir, I've spoken my piece. Have you anything to tell me?"

"Nothing. Except—"

"Well?"

Hoyt hesitated. "I'd been a bit worried about her. She hasn't been

looking at all well lately. I'm afraid she had a tendency to over-eat." There was the ghost of a smile on his face, contradicted by the blood-shot eyes. "But she said, 'So long as I do my exercises every morning, as thousands of my followers are doing'—she was very proud of her position, Inspector—"

This was hardly what Bell wanted.

"I mean, do you know any reason why anybody should have wanted to kill her?"

"None. I swear!"

"Or why she should have undressed herself in order to get killed?"

Hoyt's mouth tightened. But he was prevented from answering by the entrance of a soft, quiet, but quick-moving woman in horn-rimmed spectacles. Miss Alice Farmer, the perfect secretary, resembled the old-time notion of a school-mistress. Her face, though not unattractive, was suggestive of a buttered bun; her brown hair was dressed untidily; she wore paper cuffs and flat-heeled shoes.

Miss Farmer had many times shown her devotion to Hazel Loring during six years' service. Now her eyelids looked pink and sandaled, and occasionally she reached under the spectacles to dab at them with the tip of a handkerchief.

"Ghouls!" she said, gripping the handkerchief hard. "Ghouls! Inspector, I—I know poor Hazel's body has been taken away. But did-

n't you give orders that *none* of those horrible reporters were to be admitted to the square over there?"

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"Well," said Miss Farmer, putting out her chin bravely. "They're there now. You can see them from my window upstairs. Two of them. One is a man taking pictures; and the other, if you please, is a *woman*. How any *decent* woman could lower herself to write for the—" She stopped, and her face grew scarlet. "I mean *report*, of course; not write *nice* things; that's altogether different. Oh, dear. You do see what I mean, don't you?"

Inspector Bell saw only that his orders had been disobeyed. He stiffened.

"You're sure they're reporters?"

"Just look for yourself!"

Bell's pleasant face grew sinister. He drew a deep breath. He picked up his overcoat and his bowler hat from a chair.

"Excuse me just one moment," he said formally. "I'll attend to them."

By the time he left the house, Bell was running. The garden gate, on the west side of the square, was almost opposite Hazel Loring's house. The iron bench—once green, but now of a rust-color—itself faced due west, where the gravel path curved in front of it.

Round it prowled a small golden-haired figure in a fur coat, and a large untidy figure with a mackin-

tosh and a camera. Inspector Bell "O'd" at them; then he squared himself in front of them and began to talk.

Henry Ashwin, the photographer, took it stolidly. All he did was to pull his hat further on a pair of large projecting ears, and shrug his shoulders in an apologetic way. But Jacqueline, between indignation and utter astonishment, was struck dumb. She sincerely felt that she was helping in the investigation, and she could not understand what this man was going on about.

"You must not be such a grimy camell!" she cried, reasoning with him kindly. "You do not understand at all. I am Dubois of the *Record*. This is Mr. Ashwin of the *Record*."

"I know Mr. Ashwin," said Bell grimly. "Now, for the last time, madam: will you get out of here, or must you be taken out by main force?"

"But you do not mean that!"

Bell stared at her.

"What makes you think so?"

"And you should not talk so to the Press. It is not nice and you get yourself into trouble. Henry, I do not like this man. Kick him out of here and then we get on with our work."

"Ashwin," said Bell, "is this girl completely off her head?"

Ashwin intervened in a protesting rumble. "Sorry, Inspector; I'll fix it. Look here, Jackie, things aren't the same here as they are in

France. That's what I've been trying to tell you. In England, reporters aren't allowed to—"

"You will not do it?"

"I can't, Jackie!"

"Now I am mad," said Jackie, folding her arms with an air of cold grandeur. "Blimey, now I am good and mad; and just for that I do not tell you anything about the clue I have discovered."

"Clue?" said Bell sharply.

"Ha, *now* you are interested, eh?" cried Jacqueline, wagging her head. Her tone changed: it became timid and pleading. "Please, I like to be nice, and I like you to be nice too. I could help you if you would let me. I think I know what happen here last night. As soon as I hear about Miss Loring's shoes being unbuttoned, and hear about the wig and spectacles—"

Bell whirled round on her.

"How do you know her shoes were unbuttoned? And about any wig and spectacles? That wasn't given out to the Press!"

Twilight was deepening over the spiky trees of the garden. Not a gleam showed in Victoria Square except the hooded side-lights of a taxi, which circled the square with its engine clanking noisily. Jacqueline opened her handbag, and drew out a large oblong of glazed paper.

It was a photograph of Hazel Loring's body, taken from in front and some dozen feet away. The shadows were behind it, so that every detail showed with crude real-

ism: the upright posture but limp arms, the head thrown back, the slim muscular legs and shoes whose open fastenings were visible at a glance.

"Where," Bell shouted, "did you get this?"

"I got it, Inspector," Ashwin admitted. "I climbed over the fence this morning, before they'd moved anything. If I'd used a flash-bulb your men would have spotted me straightaway; but there was a good strong sun up to ten o'clock, so I just took a snap and hared off."

Ashwin's little eyes blinked out of the shadow of his shabby hat. It had grown so dark in the garden that little more could be seen of him except the shift and shine of his eyes, and the fact that he needed a shave. If ordinarily he might have been something of a swaggerer, he was subdued now. He also had found Jacqueline a handful.

"I wasn't even going to use the picture, I swear!" he went on, and stated his real grievance. "This girl pinched it from me, when I wasn't even going to show—"

"Shoes!" insisted Jacqueline.

Bell swung round again. "What about the shoes?"

"They is clues," said Jacqueline simply. "You must not ask me how I get my information. The wig and the spectacles I learn about from Miss Loring's maid, in a way. But I do not mind telling you what will solve your case for you, strike me pink."

Bell hesitated.

"If this is some sort of game," he snapped, "there's going to be a lot of trouble in store for certain people I could mention. Now, I warn you! But if you've got anything to tell me, let's hear it."

Jacqueline was complacent.

"You do not see that the shoes show what has happen here?"

"Frankly, I don't."

"Ah! That is why you need a woman to detect for you when a woman is murdered. Now I show you. You see in the picture that the shoes have very high-heels. Yes?"

"Yes."

"And they fasten only with one strap and one button across the . . . the . . . ah, zut!"

"Instep?"

"I am spikking the English very well, thank you," said Jacqueline, drawing herself up coldly. "I do not need your help to be pure. And I have already think to say instep. But you still do not tumble? No?" She sidled closer. Coaxing and honeysweet, her voice caressed him out of the twilight. "If I tell you, then you do something for me? You will be a nice man and let me print what I like?"

"I most certainly will not."

"Orright. Then I will not tell you."

Adam Bell's wrath boiled clear to the top. Never in his career had he met anyone quite like this. It is true that his career had not been a long one; but then Jacqueline's could

not have been so very long either. Now he meant to have no more nonsense. He would put her in her place, and with no uncertain adjectives.

He had opened his mouth to do this, when there was a flicker of a shrouded light across the square. The door of number 22 opened and closed.

Bell had a sharp premonition of disaster as soon as he heard the flat-heeled footsteps rapping and ringing on frosty pavements. A squat little figure, coatless and with wisps of hair flying, hurried across the street into the garden.

When the figure came closer, Bell saw that tears were trickling down Miss Alice Farmer's face.

"It's all your fault," she said accusingly to Bell. "Oh dear, if only you hadn't left! If only you'd stayed with him!"

"Easy now. What is it? Steady, Miss Farmer!"

"Your sergeant's 'phoned for the ambulance; and he says they may pull him through, but oh dear, if they don't I don't know what I shall do. Oh dear, it's even more dreadful than—"

Then she pulled herself together.

"I'm sorry. It's poor Mr. Hoyt. He's taken poison. You'd better come over to the house at once."

Adam Bell was not able to interview Hoyt until the following day. That morning's edition of the *Daily Record* was in Bell's pocket:

he wondered what the Assistant Commissioner would have to say about Jacqueline Dubois' story.

A nurse conducted him to a small private room, where Edward Hoyt lay propped up among the pillows of a white iron bed. Alice Farmer sat in a squeaky rocking-chair by the window, looking out at the snow-flakes that had begun to thicken over Kensington Gardens.

"Rather a foolish thing to do, wasn't it, sir?" Bell asked quietly.

"I recognize that, Inspector."

"Why did you do it?"

"Can't you guess?"

Hoyt even managed a sour smile. His hands, snake-veined, lay listless on the coverlet; his gaze wandered over the ceiling without curiosity. Yesterday he had seemed in his middle forties: now he looked ten years older.

"The curious thing is," he went on, frowning, "that I had no intention of doing it. That's a fact, Inspector. I hadn't realized—by George, I hadn't!—how terrible and irresistible a mere *impulse* can be."

He paused, as though to get his breath.

"I went upstairs," he said, "to have a look at Hazel's room. That's all. It honestly is all. I glanced into the bathroom. I saw the medicine cabinet open, and a bottle of morphine tablets inside. Before I had any notion of what I meant, I had filled a glass of water, and swal-

lowed seven or eight of the tablets as fast as I could get them down. At that time, I admit, I didn't want to live any longer."

"No, sir?"

"No. But I have changed my mind now. I am sorry: it was, as you say, a very foolish thing to do."

Always the gentleman, thought Inspector Bell.

From the direction of the window came a sharp, almost malignant squeak from the rocking-chair. Alice Farmer glanced over her shoulder, and back again quickly. The snow shed shifting lights into the warm, close room.

"Of course I realize," Bell said awkwardly, "that as Miss Loring's *fiancé*—"

"It is not quite accurate to call me her *fiancé*," returned Hoyt, with detached calmness.

His tone made Inspector Bell sit up sharply.

"Meaning, sir?"

"Hazel never intended to get married, to me or anybody else."

"How do you know that?"

"She told me so. But I kept on patiently waiting. I have always had a fancy for the senseless role of the *preux chevalier*. God knows I'm cured of that now." Hoyt closed his eyes, and opened them again. "You see that I am being frank."

"You mean she didn't love you?"

Hoyt smiled faintly. "I doubt if Hazel was ever in love with anybody. No: I wasn't referring to that."

"Well?"

"I think she was married already. One moment!" The weak voice sharpened and grew firm. "I have absolutely no evidence for saying that. It's a guess. An impression. A—well, Inspector, I haven't known Hazel Loring for five years without learning something about her beyond those famous eyebrows and dimples. I knew her moods. And her heart. And her mind: which was, after all, a second-rate mind. Lord forgive me, what am I saying?"

He broke off, looking still more ill. There was another squeak from the rocking-chair as Alice Farmer got up to pour him a glass of water from the bedside-table.

Hoyt thanked her with a grateful nod; and she hardly glanced at him. But to Inspector Bell, watching every turn of lip or hand, that glance meant much. Bell thought to himself, with a rush of realization: if Hazel Loring wasn't in love with Edward Hoyt, I know who else is.

Miss Farmer fluttered back to her chair.

"I tell you that," pursued Hoyt, setting down the glass, "because I want to see this mess cleared up. If Hazel *had* a husband tucked away somewhere in secret, she could hardly divorce him. She had set herself up in too pious a position before the world."

Drawing up the collar of his

overcoat, Bell went out of the nursing-home into the falling snow. Jacqueline Dubois, wearing a fur coat and a hat with an outrageous veil, was waiting for him at the foot of the steps.

Inspector Bell took one look at her, and then began to run.

His excuse for this was a bus, which would set him down beside a hotel in a side street only a few yards away from Victoria Square. The bus was already some distance away, and lumbering fast. Bell sprinted hard after it, sprang aboard, and climbed up to a deserted top deck. He had no sooner settled back than Jacqueline, flushed and panting, was beside him.

The girl was almost in tears.

"You are not genteel!" she wailed. "I have twist my ankle. Would you like it that I should hurt myself bad?"

"Candidly," said Bell, "yes."

"You do not like me at *all*?"

"No. Remember, I've read your story in the *Record* this morning."

"You do not like it? But, *chéri*, I wrote it to please you!"

"In the course of that story," said Bell, "you four times described me as 'handsome.' How I'm going to dare show my face back at Scotland Yard again I don't know. What is more important, you headlined—"

"You are not angry?"

"Oh, no. Not at all."

"Besides, I have a clue."

Despite everything, Bell sudden-

ly found himself chuckling. Rules were rules; but still, he reflected, he had been behaving like a good deal of a stuffed shirt. This girl need give him no trouble. And in her way Jacqueline was rather attractive.

"Not again?" he said.

"No, no, no! It is the same clue. You will not let me explain. You will not let me explain how I know that Miss Loring was not killed in the garden at all, but that the assassin kill her somewhere else and carry her to the garden afterwards."

The bus lurched around a snow-rutted curve.

Bell, taking two tickets from the conductor, almost dropped both of them.

"Is this," he demanded, "another stunt?"

"It is the truth! I know it by the shoes. The shoes have very high heels, and their straps are not buttoned."

"Well?"

"She could not have walked in them. Yes, I tell you so! She could not have walked a step in them. It is impossible. Either the shoes fall off, or *she* fall off.

"Listen! You say to yourself, 'Miss Loring has entered the garden; she has started to undress herself.' So? Then why does she take off her stockings and put her shoes back on? You say, 'While she is like this, the assassin catch her; there is a struggle; she is hit; the assassin pick her up and put her on the

bench.' I say, no, no, no! She could not have walk in those shoes. It is jolly sure she could not have *fight* in them. They would just fall off, and then there would be marks on her feet. And there were no marks, eh?"

"Go on," said Bell, after a pause.

"It jumps to the eyes that the assassin has put the shoes on Miss Loring after she is dead."

"But—"

"Now I tell you something else. What is it that puzzle you so much, *chéri*? What is the big headache? It is the reason why Miss Loring should have undress herself in the open with the weather freezing zero. Yes? But she did not.

"She has gone first to the garden. Then she has left the garden, and gone somewhere else which is indoors; and there she has undressed herself. There the assassin catch her and kill her. Then he take her back to the garden in the black-out, to make you think she was killed there. He is just starting to dress her fully when he is interrupted, and has to run. Yes?"

Their bus had gone clanking up Gloucester Terrace, and was turning into Hargreaves Street, which led to Victoria Square. Already Bell could see the square ahead. Bell smote his hand against the top of the seat in front of them.

"By all the—" he burst out, and stopped. "I wonder if it could be?"

"I do not wonder," said Jacqueline. "I am sure it is true. For any

woman to take off her clothes outdoors in such weather is not practical; and even if I am a goofy little beasel I see that straightaway, gor-blimey!"

"Just a minute. What about the heel-marks of the struggle in the earth behind the bench?"

"They is phoney," returned Jacqueline calmly. "I do not think there be any marks with the ground so hard. The assassin has made them too."

Stopping with a jolt, the bus threw them against the bench ahead. They climbed down to the pavement beside the quiet hotel only a few steps from Victoria Square. Though Jacqueline was dancing round him, Bell would not be hurried either mentally or physically.

"It's nonsense," he decided.

"You are a nasty man and I do not like you. Why is it nonsense?"

"Well, where did the woman go? You say Miss Loring went somewhere and 'undressed.' Where? Apparently she didn't go back home. Where could any woman go at that hour of the night in order to undress—?"

He checked himself, and raised his eyes. A raw wind shouted down Hargreaves Street, whipping the snow to powder. The grimy red-brick building in front of them had two entrances. Across the top of one was blazoned in gilt letters the name of the hotel. On the glass doors of the other were smaller let-

ters in white enamel, but they were letters which made Bell jump. They said:

LADIES' AND GENTLEMEN'S
TURKISH BATHS.

OPEN DAY AND NIGHT.

The woman behind the counter was scandalized. When she first caught a glimpse of them, coming down in the automatic lift into the warm, dim basement-foyer, she threw up the flap of the counter and ran out.

"You, sir!" she cried. "You can't come in here!"

"I am a police-officer—" Bell began.

The woman hesitated only a second. "Sorry, sir, but you still aren't allowed here. This is Wednesday. It's Ladies' Day. Didn't you see the notice upstairs?"

"I can come in?" cooed Jacqueline.

"Yes, madam, of course."

"Ow much?" asked Jacqueline, opening her handbag.

Taking hold of Jacqueline's arm in a grip that made her squeal, Bell drove the other woman before him until she retreated behind the counter. First he showed his warrant-card. Then he drew out a large close-up photograph of Hazel Loring's face.

"Did you ever see this lady before?"

"I—I don't know. There are so many people here. What do you want?"

On the counter lay a tray of pens

and pencils. With a coloured pencil Bell drew on the photograph a crude representation of an auburn wig. To this he added a pair of dark spectacles.

"Did you ever see *this* lady before?"

"I did and all!" admitted the woman. "Of course I did. She was always coming here at night. If you'd just tell me what you—"

"Was she here on Monday night?"

The attendant, who seemed less frightened than anxious that Bell should not get beyond the doors at the left, admitted this too.

"Yes, she was. She came in about a quarter past ten, a little later than usual. I noticed because she looked awfully groggy; sick-like; and her hands were shaky and she didn't leave any valuables here at the desk."

"What time did she leave?"

"I don't know. I—I don't remember." A puzzled look, a kind of spasm, flickered across the attendant's face. "Here's Mrs. Bradford," she added. "She'll give you what-for if you don't get out of here!"

It was very warm and faintly damp in the tiled basement. A dim humming noise throbbed beyond it. Soft lights shone on the counter, on the wall of steel boxes behind it and, towards the left, on leather-covered swing-doors, studded with brass nailheads.

One of these doors was pushed open. A stocky, medium-sized

woman, with dark hair drawn behind her ears and eyebrows that met over the top of her nose, first jerked back as though for flight, and then stood solidly. Her face was impassive and rather sinister. She wore a white-duck coat and skirt; her bare feet were thrust into beach-sandals.

"Mrs. Bradford—" the attendant began.

Mrs. Bradford gave the newcomers a long, slow look. Emotion, harsh and pressed to bursting, filled that foyer as thickly as the damp. Voices, faint laughter, made a ghostly background beyond.

"You'd better come in here," she told them. Opening a door which led into a small office, she nodded at them to precede her. When they were inside, she closed and locked the door. Then she flopped down in an office-chair and presently began to cry.

"I knew I couldn't get away with it," she said.

"So that's it," Bell muttered ten minutes later. "Hoyt told me that Miss Loring was fond of overeating."

Mrs. Bradford uttered a contemptuous snort. She was sitting forward, her elbows carelessly on her knees; she seemed to feel better now that she had been given a cigarette.

"Overeating!" she growled. "She'd have been as big as a barage-balloon if she hadn't nearly

killed herself with more Turkish baths than any human being ought to take. Yes, and keeping a medicine-cabinet full of slimming drugs that were downright dangerous. I warned her. But, oh, no! She wouldn't listen. She was making too much money out of this slimming campaign of hers."

"You knew her?"

"I've known Hazel Loring for twenty years. We were kids together in the north. She was always the lady. Not like me. And she was clever: I give her that."

Bell was putting many facts together now.

"Then the simple-exercises-and-keep-fit campaign—?"

"It was all," said Mrs. Bradford, wagging her head and blowing out smoke contemptuously, "a fake. Mind, her exercises maybe did do some people good. There's some women could hypnotize themselves into believing anything. And, if they thought it kept 'em slim . . . why, perhaps it did. But not little Hazel. That's why she had to sneak over here in a damn silly disguise, like a film star or something. She was desperately frightened somebody'd spot her."

"And yet," said Bell, "somebody murdered her. It was you, I suppose?"

The cigarette dropped out of Mrs. Bradford's hand.

"Murdered!" she whispered; and missed the cigarette altogether when she tried to stamp it out with

her foot. Then her voice rose to a screech. "Man, what's the matter with you. Are you clean daft? Murdered?"

"Sh-h!"

"Murdered?" said Mrs. Bradford. "She fell down and died in the steamroom. I had to get her out of here on the q.t., or the scandal would have ruined us."

"She died from concussion of the brain."

Mrs. Bradford's eyes seemed to turn inwards.

"Ah? So that was it! I noticed she'd got a kind of red mark on her temple, half under the wig. I supposed she had hit her head on the edge of the marble bench when she collapsed—"

"No," said Bell. "She was beaten to death with a lead-loaded walking-stick. The laboratory can prove that."

Distant fans whirled and hummed: the air was astir. Mrs. Bradford slid up from her chair, with a lithe motion for a woman so stocky, and began to back away.

"Don't you try to bluff a woman that's always been honest," she said, in a thin unnatural voice. "It was an accident, I tell you! Either heart-failure, or hitting her head when she fell. It's happened before, when people can't stand the heat. And now you come and tell me—"

"Just a moment," said Bell.

The tone of his voice made Mrs. Bradford pause, her hand half-lifted as though to take an oath.

"Now tell me," Bell continued, "did you see Miss Loring arrive here on Monday night?"

"Yes."

"How did she look? Ill, for instance?"

"Very ill. Lucy at the desk can tell you that. All shaky and funny. That's why I kept an eye on her."

"What happened then? No, I'm not accusing you of lying! Just tell me what happened."

Mrs. Bradford stared at him.

"Well . . . she went to one of the booths, and took off her clothes, and wrapped herself up in that cotton robe they wear, and went on to the hot rooms. I'm manager here: I don't act as masseuse usually, but I did it for her so that nobody shouldn't discover about the wig. I was nervous because she looked so ill. Afterwards I went up to the steam-room, and there she was lying on the floor. Alone. Dead. I thought: Holy mother, I knew something would happen, and now—"

"Go on."

"Well, what could I do? I couldn't carry her down to where her clothes were, because there were ten or a dozen other women here and they'd know what had happened."

"Go on."

"I had to get rid of her. I *had* to! I ran down and rolled her clothes and handbag up into a bundle and ran back up to the steam-room. But I couldn't dress her there, be-

cause somebody might have walked in any minute."

"Go on."

Mrs. Bradford moistened her lips. "Upstairs there's a door that leads out into an alley by the hotel. I slung her over my shoulder, and carried her out into the black-out wrapped in that cotton robe."

"I knew where to put her, too. Beside her handbag there'd been a big key, with a cardboard label saying it was the key to the garden in Victoria Square. I got her into the garden and sat her down on the first bench I came to. Then I started to dress her properly so nobody shouldn't know she'd ever been at the baths. I'd just got the underclothes on, and slipped the shoes on her feet so they'd be handy, when I heard a noise. I slipped back a little; and it's a good thing I did, for there was a great big blazing light—"

"Did I not say it?" murmured Jacqueline softly. "Did I not say the policeman has come in and interrupted her?"

"So I hopped it," concluded Mrs. Bradford, wiping her eyes. "I still had the cotton robe in my hand; but I forgot the wig and spectacles." Her face grew harsh and ugly. "That's what I did. I admit it. But that's all I did. She wasn't murdered in these baths!"

"As a matter of fact," replied Bell calmly, "I don't think she was. For all practical purposes, I think she was dead before she got here."

It was not easy to frighten Jacqueline Dubois. Only her imagination could do this. Her imagination conjured up wild visions of a dead woman in a red wig, the face already bloodless, walking into the foyer and confronting the attendant with blind black spectacles. It unnerved her. Even the humming of the fans unnerved her.

She cried out at Bell, but he silenced her.

"Queer thing," Bell mused. "I was telling Mr. Hoyt yesterday about a friend of mine. He was struck by the door of a railway carriage. He got up, brushed himself, assured everybody he wasn't hurt, went home, and collapsed an hour later with concussion of the brain. Such cases are common enough. You'll find plenty of them in Taylor's *Medical Jurisprudence*. That's what happened to Hazel Loring, in my opinion."

"You mean . . ."

"Mind!" Bell held hard to his caution. "Mind, I don't promise anything. Whether they'll want to hold you as accessory after the fact, Mrs. Bradford, I can't say. But, just between ourselves, I don't think you've got a lot to worry about."

"As I read it, Hazel Loring met the murderer in the garden at ten o'clock. There was a fight. The murderer struck her down and left her for dead. She got to her feet, thought she was all right, and came over here to the baths. In the steam-room she collapsed and died. And

you, finding the key to the garden, carried her body straight back to the real scene of the crime."

Bell drew a deep breath and his forehead wrinkled in thought.

"Talk about the wheel revolving!" he added. "All we want now is the murderer."

Edward Hoyt, released from the nursing-home on Friday morning, took a taxi to Victoria Square under a bright, watery sun which was turning the snow to slush.

The exposure of Hazel Loring's racket, appearing in Thursday's *Daily Record*, was both a revelation and a revolution. It was a real scoop for the paper.

MacGrath, the news editor, danced the saraband. Henry Ashwin, the photographer, swallowed three quick whiskies and went out to find Jacqueline. Sir Claude Champion, owner of the *Daily Banner*, swallowed aspirins and vowed vengeance. All over the country it made wives pause in the very act of the patent exercises. Yet nobody was satisfied. Through the excitement ran a bitter flavor: however much of a fake the dead woman might have been, still she was dead by a brutal attack and her murderer still walked and talked in the town.

Edward Hoyt's face seemed to express this as he went up the steps of number 22. The door was opened for him by Alice Farmer, whose face brightened with joy.

And this performance was watched with interest by Jacqueline Dubois and Henry Ashwin, the photographer, lurking behind the railings in the garden opposite.

"The point is," insisted Ashwin, giving her a sideways glance, "what is Bell doing? He now seems to think you're a kind of mascot—" Jacqueline was not without modest pride.

"He think I am pretty good," she admitted. "I just try to give him ideas, that is all. But between you and me and the pikestaff, I do not know *what* he is doing. He is very mysterious."

"Beaten, eh? Shame on you!"

Jacqueline's color went up like a flag.

"I am not beaten either! But maybe perhaps I am wrong about him. First I think he is only a stupid Englishman, all dumb and polite, and now I think his mind may work funnier than I expect. He keep talking about lights."

"Lights?"

"Big lights. Oi! Look!"

She pointed. There was another visitor for number 22. Mrs. Eunice Bradford, almost unrecognizable in an over-smart outfit and a saucer hat, strode briskly along the street. The morning sun streamed full on the doorway; they saw Mrs. Bradford punching the doorbell with assurance. She was admitted by Miss Farmer.

"Got 'em taped," said the voice of Inspector Bell.

Jacqueline felt a shock. Bell, followed by Sergeant Rankin and a uniformed constable, was coming across the slush-marshy garden with the sun behind him.

"Don't sneak up like that, Inspector!" protested Ashwin. He nodded towards the house across the way. "So it's a gathering of the suspects, eh?"

"It is."

"And you're going to nab somebody over there?"

"I am."

Jacqueline began to shiver, though the air held an almost spring-like thaw. Bell's expression was guileless.

"You can come along, if you like," he said to Jacqueline. "In fact, I might say you've got to come along. A good deal of my evidence depends on you, though you may not know it. I'll give you some poetic justice too. You've spent half your time in this business worming things out of people or pinching things from people. I've taken the liberty of pinching something from you."

"You go away!" said Jacqueline. "Please, what is this? I do not understand."

Bell opened the brief-case he was carrying. "You remember," he said, "how you solved your part of the problem by deducing something from the unbuttoned shoes in a photograph taken the morning after the murder?"

"Yes."

Bell drew a large glazed oblong of paper from the brief-case. It was the picture they had all seen: Hazel Loring's body on the bench, every detail sharp-etched with the shadows behind.

"Is this the same photograph?"

"Ah, zut! Of course it is."

Bell glanced at Ashwin.

"You confirm that? This is the same photograph you took at about ten o'clock on Tuesday morning?"

Ashwin, with a face of hideous perplexity, merely nodded. Sergeant Rankin suddenly guffawed: a sharp sound which he covered up with a cough.

"Then it's very curious," said Bell. He held up the photograph. "It's the most curious thing we've come across yet. Look at it. Every shadow in this picture, as we see, falls straight behind bench and body. Yet the bench, as we've known from the start, faces due west and has its back to the east.

"Look at the bench now. See how the shadows fall in front of it along the path. In other words, this photograph couldn't possibly have been taken in the morning. It couldn't have been taken at any time during the day, because the sun was gone in the afternoon. That bright light and those dead-black shadows could have been made in only one way. The photograph must have been taken, after dark, by the glare of a flash-bulb: which was the 'great big blazing light' Mrs. Bradford saw when she—"

Jacqueline screamed.

One face in the group altered and squeezed up as though it were crumpling like a wet paper mask. A pair of hands flung forward to grab the photograph from Bell and rend it in pieces; but Sergeant Rankin's arm was round the man's throat and the two of them went over backwards in a crashing cart-wheel on the path.

Bell's voice remained level.

"Henry Ashwin, I arrest you for the murder of your wife, Hazel Loring. I have to warn you that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used as evidence against you at your trial."

To Jacqueline, that night, Bell was a little more communicative.

"There's nothing much to tell," he said off-handedly. "Once I got Hoyt's tip, and we put the organization to work, it didn't take long to discover that one Hazel Ann Loring and one Henry Fielding Ashwin had been married at the Hampstead Registry Office in 1933." He grinned. "That's where the official police will always score over you amateurs."

Jacqueline was agog.

"He try the blackmail on her. Yes?"

"Yes, in a small way. A nasty bit of work is Ashwin. In the first place, he was a no-good who would take some explaining; in the second place, she couldn't afford

to have the gaff blown about her racket. That was why Ashwin was pretending to make what you call goo-goo eyes at Hazel Loring's maid: he had to have some excuse for hanging round the house so constantly.

"But Hazel was getting fed up with it. She issued an ultimatum, and arranged to meet him in the garden. There was a wild, blind row: both of them, we know, had ugly tempers. Ashwin laid her out, and then ran. It wasn't a planned crime: he just ran.

"After he'd had a couple of drinks, he began to get scared. He'd left that stick behind. He didn't *think* they could trace it to him; but suppose they did? So he went back to the square—and must have thought he was losing his mind. For he saw Eunice Bradford bringing the body back.

"In any case, he thought it was a gift from heaven. If he could frame any evidence against her, Mrs. Bradford would swing for the crime as sure as eggs. He set his flash-bulb and fired blindly for a picture. But in the dark his aim was bad; Mrs. Bradford had jumped back; and he didn't get her in the picture at all. He saw that when he developed the picture. Of course he'd never have shown that photograph to anyone. He'd have torn up the pictures and destroyed the negative. Only—"

Jacqueline nodded radiantly.

"I pinch it from him," she de-

clared, with pride. "And then he have to stew up some explanation for it."

"Yes. Of course, I—saw that the dim, paper-covered torch of the policeman who discovered the body could never have produced that 'great big blazing light' described by Mrs. Bradford. Then, once you looked closely at the photograph and noticed the fall of the shadows, that tore it. I gathered the obvious suspects in one house to throw Ashwin off his guard; and got him to confirm his previous story before police witnesses. That's all."

He chuckled.

"There's one good result from it, anyway," he added. "Edwart Hoyt and Alice Farmer should be extremely comfortable with each other."

But Jacqueline was not listening. Her eyes were shining and absorbed. She put her hand with innocent fervor on his arm.

"If I had not pinch the picture," she said, "and if I had not deduce those things, maybe you would not have solved the case. Eh?"

"Maybe not."

"You do not think I am such a goofy little beasel. No?"

"No."

"In fact, day by day in every way I am becoming indispensable to you. Yes?"

The hair froze on Bell's head. "Hold on! Take it easy! I didn't say that!"

"But I say it," declared Jacqueline, with fiery earnestness. "I think we go well together, yes? I pinch things for you; and if you like you can be my Conscience and go gobble-gobble at me, but you do not be too mad when I help you. Then each day I get an exclusive inter—inter—"

"Interview," suggested Bell.

"O.K., if you say so, though my

knowledge of English is formidable and you do not have to tell me. If I like you very much and am a good girl, will you let me help with the detecting when I ask to?"

Bell looked down at the flushed, lovely face.

"I will," he said, "*ou je serai l'oncle d'un singe!* My knowledge of French is formidable too."



Charlotte Armstrong

The Evening Hour

Meet Mike Russell, a Mysterious-Stranger-kind-of-detective, a man of good will always ready to help the underdog. For all his flaming youth, Mike has one old-fashioned trait: when asked by those in trouble what they can do, Mike is not ashamed to say, "We can pray." But he knows what to pray for—"for something tangible, something we can offer as proof" . . .

DICK HUNTER SWUNG HIS CAR IN toward the curb where, looking pinched and chilly in the early fog, his sister Marjorie was standing. "You be out there," he'd commanded, on the phone. "Quicker to pick you up in front of the hospital. You just be there." Now their eyes met in one quick look. He knew his were impatient and even hostile. She got in as if fright and bewilderment were making her clumsy. He sent the car forward and it scuttered through the scattered traffic, hunting, in this dim and unreal dawn, the quickest way.

"Who called you? Parrish? What'd he tell you?" he snapped.

"Just . . . that Mr. Gittens is dead. Mother must see us . . ."

"Didn't say he'd been shot? Didn't mention the police?"

"N-no . . . You said . . ."

"They figured to spare you," said Dick grimly. "There was murder in that house last night and mother's mixed up in it."

"She can't be!"

"She is."

His sister whimpered. She was the baby, little and fair. Now the starched look of crisp competence, that nurse's look she wore in her work, that cocky air of knowing just a bit more about some important mysteries than the lay person—all that was gone.

"Listen, Marjie, we don't know a damned thing . . ." He couldn't express what he was thinking. He let it go. The thing was to drive fast and get there, to that house in Pasadena where their mother lived with strangers.

He thought bitterly of his ignorance. He and Celia and the kids, putting on their act, when mother came. Look, mother. Aren't we doing well? Aren't the kids cute? Isn't the house charming? Doesn't my Celia run it cleverly? Am I not smart at the office? Look, mother, look at me!

Thirty-one years of it, he thought,

beginning with mud pies. Look what I made, mother! Crayon drawings. Report cards. The baseball letter. The piece in the college paper. Look, mother!

And mother looks, year in, year out. Mother says, "Why, that's good, dear!"

He groaned, thinking how glibly he and Celia spoke of her, entertaining their friends with this. Dick's mother is a spunky little character. You ought to meet her. First thing we knew, after Dick's father died, here's Mum with a job. Answered an ad in the paper, imagine! And comes up with this juicy position as companion to this wealthy old dame. Travels, mind you! All over the world! Lives in the lap of luxury in a Pasadena mansion, when they're not in Rio or Honolulu. Really wonderful!

Was it? he thought. *Is it?* Mother's life with these strangers, this Mr. and Mrs. Lewis C. Gittens . . . one dead, as of this morning, and one dying. "We don't *know*!" he repeated aloud.

"Will it be in the papers?" his sister said shrinkingly.

"Oh, yes. No doubt." It'll be a sensation, he thought, in your tight little world at the hospital, among the internes, and your chums and your dates. And in my little world, my happy-young-couple-with-two-small-children world, too.

"That's not the point," he said savagely.

It was an old house, an "eastern"

house, clapboard and shingle, turrets and gingerbread, three stories high. Mrs. Hunter's son and daughter had never been inside its walls. Here, if anywhere, their mother lived, but it was a home not open to them. *Or was it?* Dick thought. *We never tried.*

He took Marjorie by the arm and brusquely, propelled by his deep anger with himself, he marched up the stoop and rang the bell.

A houseman in a white coat let them in. A tense, skinny, elderly little man stepped briskly through an arch. "Mr. and Miss Hunter? I'm Charles Parrish. Spoke to you on the phone. Come in." They went past a third man, sitting on a tapestried bench with the air of being a spectator here. Police, Dick thought. And there was yet a fourth man in the corner of a sofa. But eyes and mind flew forward to where his mother was, there, in the drawing-room, in the big brown chair.

He caught her hands up, kissed her cheek. "O.K. Mum?" His voice came out light and almost gay.

But he was looking at a weary and disheveled woman. The whole room spoke of a vigil. It wore a night look, as if it had not realized the morning. Lamps burned, last night's drinking glasses, a cup and a saucer, stood there, and ashtrays unwashed. Mrs. Margaret Hunter, in her white-trimmed, dark blue silk, her neat navy shoes, lay crumpled in the chair. The snowy mass

of her abundant hair was slipping from its high knot, the tousled, untidy, wisp-flying look of it was shocking. Her dark eyes, always so unexpected in her soft-skinned, delicately tinted face, were, for a moment, a stranger's eyes.

But Marjorie (*little fool*, thought her brother) went down on her knees, whimpering. "It's all right, baby," mother said. (It was mother, after all.) "There's been so much confusion . . . It'll be straightened out soon . . ." Her hand, in that old loving gesture, was petting and smoothing the girl's fair hair. "Did Mr. Parrish wake you?" she inquired fondly of Marjorie.

Dick said, "Why didn't you call us sooner? When did this happen?"

"Mrs. Hunter wouldn't allow me," the old man, Parrish, was weary, too. "You see . . . Mrs. Gittens . . . so ill . . . the doctor upstairs . . . *her* son, also . . ." His eyebrows filled out his sentences. "I fear . . . in fact, we were informed . . . Mrs. Gittens has just passed away." The vigil, then, had been a death watch. Mother's hand kept soothing, stroking . . .

Charles Parrish's claw nipped at Dick's sleeve, turned him around. ". . . to meet a young friend . . . I, as the family's lawyer and, of course, well acquainted with Mrs. Hunter, presumed . . . I hope you will approve . . . This is Mr. Archibald Russell . . . er . . . 'Mike' Russell . . . better versed than I in . . . er . . . criminal law . . ."

"Forget the Archibald," the dark young man unfolded himself from the sofa, grinned, and shook Dick's hand. "Good morning. I'm here to be on your side, if and when it becomes necessary."

"There was a crime?" Dick said tensely.

"Yes."

"Who . . . did it? What . . . ?"

"We aren't quite sure," said the young man softly. "Lieutenant Doyle is upstairs . . . no, he's here."

A man, fortyish, sturdy, compact, came into the room a step ahead of a thin, weedy, younger chap on whose short upper lip a small mustache rode like a pale brown sneer.

"Lieutenant, this is Richard Hunter and Miss Marjorie Hunter. And Mr. David Keyes . . ." Parrish broke off to say gently, "My dear David, may I express my sympathy . . . your dear mother's passing."

"I've called . . . the right people," David Keyes said in a high, nervous voice. "I don't think there is anything to do until they come. Mrs. Chew is . . . with her. If you don't mind," his eyes slid around to the white-haired woman in the chair with a certain distaste, "please make yourselves at home, but . . . you must excuse me."

Mrs. Hunter's lips had opened as if to speak, but she had not spoken. The young chap went away, withdrawing into some recess of the house with that air of fastidious dislike.

Dick swallowed anger. "And if you don't mind," he said ominously, "I would like to be told what has been going on here."

"Tell us, Lieutenant," said the dark young man, this Russell, in a wheedling tone.

"Mrs. Hunter your client, Mike?"

"If she needs me."

"Sit down," said Doyle.

"Marjie, please, dear," Mrs. Hunter said and some strain thinned the gentleness of her voice, "don't kneel!"

Dick whirled and lifted his sister roughly. "For gosh sake," he said in her ear, "quit asking Mum to kiss it and make it well." He shook her, secretly, as he thrust her into a seat.

Doyle did not sit down. He looked around at them. His gray eyes, narrow and intent, summoned them to listen to the facts.

"Dinner here was at seven last night. Mrs. Grace Gittens did not come down but had a tray. At nine, Mrs. Chew, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Hunter, having prepared her for the night, they . . . and Mr. Gittens . . . left her room. Mrs. Chew retired to her own place on the third floor. Mr. Gittens and Mrs. Hunter then came down and sat together in the sun room."

The sun room, he told them with his hand, was there, through an arch at the drawing-room's far end. No sun came into it now. Monk's-cloth draperies muffled all the glass.

"Alfred Martz, the houseman,

went out at a few minutes after nine to call on a friend in the neighborhood. At ten fifteen, he was returning. That is, he was standing on the back stoop, key in one hand and watch in the other, wondering whether to come in so early or go on to a bar, when he heard a revolver shot inside the house.

"On the third floor, the housekeeper was awakened by the noise and sat up in bed. Martz recovered his wits quickly, unlocked the back door, rushed through the kitchen and pantry to this hall. Grace Gittens, in her night clothing, was standing at the foot of the stairs. Mr. Gittens was slumped in that wing-chair facing us, there in the sun room. Martz looked across this room which was lighted about as it is now, saw him, and saw Mrs. Hunter bending over him, calling his name.

"Before he could move, Mrs. Gittens cried out these words: 'It was Margaret Hunter who did that. Margaret Hunter killed him!'" And Doyle paused.

"Hearsay?" said Russell mildly in the thickening silence.

Doyle glanced at him with pure contempt, ignored the interruption, and went on. "Mrs. Gittens then collapsed. Mrs. Hunter ran to her, saying, and again I quote Martz, 'Oh, Martz, he's dead! Somebody shot. It killed him!' By now, the housekeeper was at the top of this first flight. The three of them carried Mrs. Gittens up to her bed.

Martz called Dr. Allsberry and then Headquarters."

The Lieutenant cleared his throat. "On our arrival we found Mr. Gittens dead in that chair. The bullet had entered his throat."

"Not suicide?" said Russell.

"No," said Doyle flatly. "Shot was fired from ten to twenty feet away. The bullet came from a gun kept loaded in a drawer of that table." He indicated a massive mahogany piece there in the drawing-room. "We found the gun on the tiled floor of the sun room. Near it was a heavy velvet cloth, a table cover or throw. There are no fingerprints on the gun. And no traces of having discharged a gun on the bare hands of Mr. Gittens himself, Mrs. Gittens, Mrs. Chew, or Mrs. Hunter, although these four were the only people in this locked house. The killer, you see, wrapped the gun. . . ."

"That's ridiculous!" Dick Hunter cried, and then faltered, but he had to go on. "For heaven's sakes, Mum," he scoffed, "you wouldn't even know about such things . . . fingerprints and skin tests . . ."

"Of course I know about such things," said his mother quietly. "I read, Dick. We all listened to the radio so much . . ." Her head rolled on the chair's cushioning back. Her son looked at her tired smile and he thought, My Gosh, I haven't the faintest idea what she knows or what she doesn't know!

"But you can't seriously . . . !"

Doyle said, "Mrs. Gittens recovered consciousness. Knowing she was dying, she made a statement. Witnessed by several of us, taken down, and, in fact, signed. Mrs. Gittens stated that she saw Mrs. Margaret Hunter fire the revolver."

Marjorie Hunter made a choking sound and fell forward and was on her knees again with her fair head buried on her mother's arm. Something picked Dick up and moved him as if he'd been a wooden checker on a painted board, across the room to his mother's side. "Mum," he said in complete panic, "you mustn't worry. Not for a minute! They can't. . . ."

Some mask pulled over her face, some strength put it there. "Of course not . . . hush. There's been a mistake," she soothed. "Poor Grace was confused, somehow. I told Lieutenant Doyle, the shot came from behind me. It passed me close. . . ." For a moment, through the mask, her eyes looked not at the present room, but into the past.

"You say you were seated on that wicker love seat?" It jutted, back to this room, across the arched opening of the sun room where Doyle was pointing.

Mrs. Hunter's eyes came a long way back. She put her hand on the girl's head. "Yes," she said faintly, carelessly. "Hush, Marjie . . ."

"Mummy, you didn't. . . . They can't say that. . . . It's wicked. . . ."

"Of course, baby . . ." said mother. "Hush. . . ."

Mike Russell yanked up his trouser leg, displaying a wild yellow and red plaid sock. "Hm," he said. "So Mrs. G. was not awakened by the shot, eh? What was she doing downstairs, that she saw all this?"

"I dunno, Mike," confessed Doyle with a certain humility.

And Mrs. Hunter's dark eyes went to the young lawyer with quick and almost comradely respect. Like one grown-up to another, thought her son and clenched his hands. He thought, We're not helping her. "Cut that out, Marjie," he said sharply. He thought, Mother's been living among the Lord knows what passions and strains we never heard of, and even now, we force her to comfort us.

He made himself go back to the chair. He said, as calmly as he could, "What motive do you believe my . . . Mrs. Hunter had to do such a thing?"

"I dunno," said Doyle frankly.

"A good question," said Mike Russell softly, "a very good question."

"Well . . . there were hysterics and high words in Mrs. Gittens's bedroom yesterday afternoon, or so they tell me." The Lieutenant threw this out. The remark seemed to lie on the rug, among them.

Dick met his mother's eyes and tried to smile. "Do you know what that was about, Mum?" he asked quietly.

"Of course, dear. We all know. Poor Grace, you see, found out that

her health. . . . In fact, that she was going to die, quite soon. The doctor. . . ."

"The doctor told me," said Doyle, unabashed. "Said she asked for it when he was here about noon. Seems she fooled him. Some people can take it, and he thought she could take it. But I guess she was pretty upset."

"She was terribly . . . resentful," murmured Mrs. Hunter.

"Doc left her sedatives, he says."

"They couldn't have been strong enough," Mrs. Hunter sighed.

"Money here," said Doyle, looking around him. "So, speaking of motive, what about legacies?"

"Dear me, I . . . well, I can tell you, of course," said Mr. Parrish. "Odd situation." He got to his feet, as if he could speak better standing up. "The Gittenses were married only four years ago. He has a daughter, married and living in Texas. She has a son . . . er . . . here. That is, in Los Angeles. Now, they had not drawn new wills since the marriage. I've positively nagged . . . However . . ." he touched his glasses. "Mr. Gittens never approved of young David Keyes. There was unpleasantness between them whenever they tried to discuss the terms of new documents. And, as a matter of fact, their property was not community property because of this perennial dispute. The fact is, now, it makes rather a difference which of the . . . er . . . couple died first."

He looked about and seemed to relish all these pricked-up ears. "He, you see, had a great deal of property. She had some. Now, Mr. Gittens having predeceased her, she takes her share as *his* surviving spouse and that share plus all of her own goes to David."

"Whereas," said Russell quickly, "otherwise, *he* would have taken his survivor's share of her little lot, and that and all his, to the daughter."

"Exactly."

"A difference in cold cash," said Russell, "to Mr. David Keyes."

"Quite a difference."

Marjorie was biting a fingernail, looking less lost.

"Did," asked Dick, slowly, thinking it out, "er . . . David know what the doctor had told his mother?"

"Oh, yes," said Doyle with an air of lying low. "He was here in the afternoon."

"And where was David in the evening?" asked Russell.

"At the theater with five friends in the fifth row," answered Doyle, "and between the acts, since he is not a smoker, he remained in the fifth row, between two ladies."

The Lieutenant turned his head. "I asked about legacies."

Old Mr. Parrish drew himself up. "There is no legacy to Mrs. Hunter," he announced stiffly.

"So . . . what motive?" asked Russell softly.

"None," exploded Dick, sudden-

ly furious that they should sit and discuss this sort of thing before her face.

He lost his place for a moment in the storm of this emotion. Then he realized the Lieutenant was talking. "You'd say you were all friends, would you, Mrs. Hunter? You did get along all right with the old man?"

She said, wearily, "It was a very pleasant household. But now . . ." Her hands fell apart, signifying an end.

"Now," said Dick grimly, rising to his feet, "now, since you seem to have been sitting up here all night, Mum, it is high time you got some rest. I'm taking you home to Celia."

"Oh, she dozed a bit in the chair," said Parrish with a flutter.

"Goodness, did I?" said Mrs. Hunter a bit breathlessly.

This exchange did not quite cover up the silence, the wordlessness of Lieutenant Doyle, and the intent listening of young Mr. Russell to that silence.

Then Russell unwound himself and stood up. Little old Mr. Parrish bounced up. Marjorie gathered her feet under her.

"Where do you live, Hunter?" Doyle said at last.

"Santa Monica," said Dick.

"I'd rather she stayed here in this town."

"But not in this house, of course," said Russell immediately. "Hotel, eh? Good. I can fix it. You children will want to stick around?"

Dick thought, I'm at least five years older than he is. Marjorie must have heard that sting in his tone, too, for she said with a faint return of her normal crispness, "Naturally."

"No, dears . . ." said their mother weakly, "you have your affairs . . ."

"Fix it," said Dick flatly.

They wrapped their mother in a coat and took her away from there just as she was. Old Mr. Parrish tottered wearily in a direction of his own, but young Mr. Russell, without asking, got into Dick's car, too. At the hotel, not asking, he came up to the rooms with them. They were, Dick realized, frantically anxious that he should. He must. For what do you say to your mother who may be arrested for killing a man? What do you say? What do you do? You do not weep. You cannot say, "Mother, never mind . . ." You cannot ask her to comfort *you*.

When Russell ambled in after them and took off his topcoat, Mrs. Hunter seemed to relax as if she, too, was glad of his presence.

Marjorie stacked and plumped the pillows on the clean hotel bed, took off her mother's shoes, pulled the spread up over her feet. Acting like a nurse, thought Dick, which she knows how to do. Russell suggested breakfast and it was Marjorie who phoned for it. All this filled in only a very little time.

"What now?" Dick said it.

Russell lounged in the hotel's chair, extended long legs, and crossed wild red and yellow ankles. "Now," he said cheerfully, "we find out what really happened, because Margaret is going to tell us."

A shadow crossed Mrs. Hunter's face.

"Marjorie," said Russell, "may I? Thank you. I can't bear even to think Miss Hunter. Call me Mike. Anybody named Archibald Percival naturally has to become either Pat or Mike or just possibly Joe. You're Dick. And she, of course, is Margaret. Peggy, do they ever say?"

"They used to," Margaret said.

Dick thought, He is right. This is the way. A dear friend in trouble, she must seem to us now. A woman whose life we don't know much about. But now we need to know and she must feel free. We are not children.

He straddled a chair, he felt himself grin. "O.K., Peggy, now that there's only us chickens around," he said, "take down your hair."

Russell flaunted one of his bright ankles. "Yeah, what kind of old biddy was this Grace Gittens, anyhow?"

Margaret Hunter smiled mistily on them both, but a flicker of her eye was on Marjorie's face . . . tense Marjorie with the frightened eyes that still said, Mother, make it well.

"Grace was a very nice woman," she began primly.

"Religious?" said Russell.

"No."

"Superstitious, then?"

"No, she prided herself . . ."

"Dying, for her, was dust to dust?"

"I . . . think so."

"Scared green . . . raised hell . . ."

"Well, she did," said Margaret Hunter with a tinge of anger. "She behaved pretty badly."

"Had a time with her, I'll bet."

"We did that," said Margaret, surrendering suddenly and speaking out. "She certainly did carry on. Those sedatives had no more effect . . . We were exhausted when she finally thought she might doze off, and she let us go."

"You must have relished some peace and quiet."

Her whole face winced. "We were terribly concerned, of course," she murmured and she hid her eyes.

"This Lewis Gittens, was he a nice guy?"

"Very nice. A fine gentleman."

Then Russell said, directly and soberly, "What was your relationship with those people?"

"I . . ." Her eyes flew to her children.

"She was your employer?"

"Yes. That is, I was hired to be her companion. You see, she liked to travel and he did not. Between trips, I acted more or less as her secretary."

"It wasn't unusual for you to sit

with Mr. Gittens in the sun room, as you were sitting last evening?"

"Not at all. In fact, you see . . . Grace retired so early . . . every night at nine. And I . . . did not. There was always an evening hour or perhaps a little longer, when he and I—" the pronouns betrayed her—"would sit quietly. Perhaps I'd sew. Or we might listen to some music. Not often even chatting." She closed her eyes. "As you say, there was peace," she murmured.

Dick thought with a pang that he had never even met this dead Mr. Gittens. "You were friends, Mum?" he said.

"We were all good friends," she said chidingly.

"Did Grace Gittens mind, I wonder?" Russell looked dreamily at the ceiling.

"Mind?"

"Mind the undeniable, inescapable, thunder-and-lightning fact that it *was* peaceful during that evening hour?"

Nobody answered. Marjorie stirred. "Mum, you've got to rest." Her eyes were hot and sulky on the young man's face. "You talk too much."

"She needs her breakfast, child," said Russell softly, but with that sting. Then he said carelessly, "I suppose Grace shot him, eh?"

Marjorie gasped. Mrs. Hunter raised herself on her elbow. "As a matter of fact, I think so," she said. "There was someone in the drawingroom. He saw that. I . . .

would have looked behind me in a moment but . . ." she fell back weakly, "there was the shot . . ."

"Hear anything?"

"Yes. Yes. A kind of breathing. Sobbing breathing." Mrs. Hunter raised her dark eyes. "But what can I say? How will it ever be known? You see, she was in such a state. She had lashed herself into this frenzy. She couldn't sleep, I suppose. She must have come down and . . ." she stopped and added lamely, "she was out of her mind."

"Come down," said Russell dreamily, "looking for someone to listen to her terrible woe . . . and run slambang into . . . peace. There was this peace. And she, going to go, screaming 'No!' . . . to her cold grave, and leave him to be cozy and quiet in the living world . . ."

"Out of her mind . . ." said Mrs. Hunter faintly.

"But not so far that she forgot about the fingerprints," mused Russell. "She must have been an old devil, if you'll pardon me."

"No," said Mrs. Hunter. "No; perhaps she was restless and self-centered . . ."

"Self-centered," cried Dick with his hair stirring in horror. "But she lied, dying! Mum, she *lied* and said she saw you!"

A boy with breakfast knocked on the door. Marjorie stirred and dealt with this. She served her mother. Moving crisply, she served them all.

Russell paid her no more attention than he would have paid a waitress. He stirred his coffee.

"These deathbed statements," he said resignedly. "Y'know, the respect we have for them is a leftover, dates back to pious times. The reason we figure a dying man's not going to lie is because he thinks he'll go to hell if he does. But suppose he doesn't believe in heaven or hell? Suppose she isn't religious?"

"She was a *dévil*," Dick groaned.

"She did lie," Marjorie said, suddenly, "Maybe to protect her son."

"What?"

"He'll get that money."

Russell smiled. "You're not dreaming that little David rigged his alibi?" Marjorie looked angry. "You'd like that, dear," said Russell. "We all would. But don't dream. 'Tain't going to be."

"No, no," said Marjorie, "that isn't what I meant. Look, because of the order in which they died, he gets Mr. Gittens's money *through her*. But she couldn't inherit her husband's money if she killed him. Could she?"

"Hah!" said Russell. "The ingenious mind. You read 'em, too, don't you, dear? Might do, at that," he said cynically. "There's a mighty strong tradition, too. Mothers live for the kids alone. Mother, legend says, will do anything for her child, though he's left the nest, though he be grown." His eyes rested on Marjorie's reddening face. "Whatever else has *she* got to live for?"

Dick thought, Let one good-looking young guy she's never seen in her life before hint all this, and *now* she *gets* what a mere brother couldn't tell her in a million tries.

"And so," Russell went on, "we can put up this alternative theory to occupy the minds of the jury, eh? Mrs. G. is hysterical. She's going to die, and oh, me, what about those wills? And baby David would so like the money. So she thinks, Mama will fix. So she quick shoots her husband. However, a bit later she realizes she'd better fasten the deed on somebody else, say a perfectly innocent and friendly woman, or baby-boy won't get the money after all. Oh, me," said Mr. Russell. "Mother love . . . Still, providing she had any least little grudge against Margaret, here, why, could be she was thinking of Davey-boy when she lied . . ."

Marjorie said with outraged eyes, "If you are suggesting that my mother was having an . . ."

"Ah . . . ah . . ." said Russell. He elevated a leg to the arm of the chair and his bright sock gleamed. "Funny thing," he mused, "a young girl like you, sis, you'll have your dates. 'May I have the pleasure of your company?' your beau says. 'Why, yes,' says you. And the hunts or the skirmishes-those dates may be in the secret jungle life of the courting young, *you know*. But you *don't* know, when a woman's kids are grown and gone and she finds herself alive . . . sometimes 'the

pleasure of her company' is a real . . . sweet . . . fact . . ."

"That will do, I think," said Mrs. Hunter quietly.

"Ma'am," said Russell, "forgive me, please."

There was silence. "What is likely to happen, Mr. Russell?" said Marjorie, sharply.

"Hm? Oh, I'll tell you," he said. "And it ain't good. No, it ain't. Although, I don't think it's dangerous. Too much doubt. And no motive. They've really got to have some hint of a motive. The likeliest thing, I am sorry to say, is that you will all have to go through a long and pretty terrible ordeal. Your mother will be dragged about. Press, you know, and all that. But I don't think, in the end, she's in danger." He paused. "We'll do what we can."

"What can we do?"

"We can pray," said Russell. He got up and took a turn on the floor.

"Too bad the curtains were drawn in that sun room. We won't dig up any stray witnesses. Fact, I don't know what we *can* get. It'll be a character thing . . . reasonable doubt and so on. And sometimes that's tough."

Margaret Hunter's face was agonized.

"I'll tell you what to pray for," Russell said. "Pray for something tangible, something we can offer as proof. Physical proof. Good old science. A material fact. Something to show either that Mrs. Hunter could

not possibly have fired that shot or that Mrs. Gittens must have."

"But *what*?"

"I dunno what. Probably there'll be no such thing. I'm only telling you what would stop . . . what's likely to happen."

Margaret looked sick at heart.

"Well," said Dick, "you put it up to us good and plain, Mike. I suppose we ought to thank you for that. So what do we do? Why, we go through it. We come out on the other side, some day."

He wanted to weep, to howl, to cry, *Mummy* . . . and thinking he'd hidden that under a brave speech he was astonished to hear Marjorie say, crisply, "Shut up, Dick. Stop yowling. Mum's tired." She took the tray away from her mother. She sat down on the bed and put her clean nurse's hand with its immaculate unpainted nails on her mother's cheek. She said, "And she's bothered. Look. Mum, we'd better face it. You're a pretty lovely lady." There were two women, suddenly, looking at each other. "You were fond of him," Marjorie said, "and he of you, naturally. We'd better admit it. So why would *you* do it. How can *you* be guilty?"

"I am guilty," said Margaret.

Her son's heart turned over in pure pity, just pity, great sadness and great pity.

But her daughter smiled and said, "Uh huh. How?"

"How?" Their mother's dark eyes opened.

"How do you figure that?" said Marjorie. "You kinda loved him, or he was . . . at least . . . dear to you. And I know you're grieving." Woman looked at woman. "But what are you holding back?"

Dick held his breath. "She . . . put us through such a harrowing day," said Margaret Hunter brokenly. "We knew . . . too, it might go on until the day she'd die. So . . . after we'd sat quietly a while . . . he couldn't help breaking down a little. He . . . begged me for help. It was the first, the only time we spoke of ourselves. He asked if I would surely . . . see him through what was going to be. I . . . vowed I would. That I wanted to . . . I was kneeling . . . at his feet . . . When she came down, she saw us. And he . . . and he straightened up. There were tears on my face and I didn't look. But I think she shot at *me*," said Margaret Hunter.

"Guilty," said Marjorie softly. "Ah, you goose!" She turned around. "You men get out of here. Mummy, you'll get to bed now. Get to sleep. To rest. Don't you see," said Marjorie to the men, "she's got to grieve. She's got to cry."

Russell saluted the girl with two fingers to his forehead. He got up and started for his topcoat. Dick drifted with him. He, himself, could not have spoken a word without a sob.

Marjorie was using that old, old

loving gesture, while Margaret wept in her arms. Marjorie was soothing and petting the tousled white hair. She began to slip hair-pins out of the mass. She ran her fingers back from the brow.

She said, in a voice of utter astonishment, "What in the world . . .!" She was holding up a long strand of white hair that had separated strangely from the rest.

Russell yelled, "Don't touch it! Don't move! Either of you! Sit still. Be quiet." He dashed to the phone. "Outside wire. Get Doyle," he explained. "This is it! Who was praying? Who's got the ear of the Lord like that!"

Mrs. Hunter stared at him.

"Lieutenant Doyle?" he yelled into the mouthpiece. "Yes, yes, I'll wait." He covered the mouthpiece and beamed at them. "The cook woke up only once . . . and you in full view . . . Ah, that's nonsense. Not important. Naturally, you couldn't have pinned up your hair and it cut like that. And all night you sat in the chair . . ."

"In the building?" he barked to the phone. "Good. I'll hang on." He waved the phone jubilantly. "He says, 'Peg, take your hair down,' he says! And by golly, at last she does!"

"What are you talking about?" said Dick.

"Who? Me? Hah! I shall inquire of the Lieutenant," said Russell, full of glee, "how a woman can possibly take a revolver and point it at the bun on the top of her, from the front, back, or sideways, and shoot a man *through* it."

"The bullet went through her hair! She might have been . . .!" Dick staggered.

"But she wasn't. She's saved by a hair!" cried Russell.

"Hair's-breadth escape!" cried Dick, leaping where he stood.

Marjorie stroked her mother's hand. "Never mind them. It's just their boyish way of being glad."

"You . . . good kids," said mother. And she thought, Even sorrow dies . . .

"I know," said Marjorie.

Louis Bromfield

Crime Passionnel

A delightful, titillating, and extremely witty story about suspected blackmail, threatened suicide, and a trial for murder—not to mention another crime of, shall we say, too delicate a nature to be commented on—by one of America's most famous literary figures and Pulitzer Prize winners . . .

SHE CAME TO US RECOMMENDED BY Sister Theresa of St. Joseph's, in the cheerful summer of 1932, to do the nursery laundry and scrub the nursery floors. She was quite a big girl and very strong and well developed for the sixteen years Sister Theresa said she had spent on this earth. Her parents lived in a small house near the millrace on the road to Fleurines, where once the hounds were blessed every year on St. Hubert's Day—a small, romantic house overshadowed by poplar trees, with a rose tree called Les Dept Sœurs climbing over the house, just such a house as Abbé Prévost would have chosen for Manon Lescaut.

Joséphine was her name—not a flashy name like Colette or Jacqueline or even Euphémie, but just a commonplace, middle-class name which might mean anything at all. She had a high-colored and lusty beauty, like a rather bad, overpainted Flemish picture, and a curious habit of looking at you, especially if

you were a man, and giggling. Afterward, it occurred to me that this might have given us the tip-off, but at the moment we passed it over, since it was difficult to find anybody to wash the diapers and nighties for a nursery overcrowded by three children of our own and five small visiting cousins, inconsiderately spaced a year apart, from four and a half years to six months.

Although Senlis was a dead, ecclesiastical city and not an industrial town, there was a crisis in domestic labor caused by the presence of a single factory known as Le Caoutchouc de Senlis and given over to the manufacture of rubber goods. It occupied a handsome old house just across the street from ours, by the edge of the canal which flowed through our garden. After the canal had passed the factory, it became the moat which surrounded the ramparts of the ancient Vauban fortifications of the town. Le Caoutchouc de Senlis was important in our lives because it

had absorbed all the young girls who might have been available as nursery maids—all except Joséphine. We discovered that Joséphine had resisted the lure of the Caoutchouc de Senlis because she and her mother felt the moral effect of such an establishment was not good—that factory work was beneath a young woman of her accomplishments. We did not understand at the time the full extent of the rôle which ambition was to play in Joséphine's career.

She began her duties with gusto and for a time was considered a great success even by Nanny, one of those paragons, produced only by England, who are an odd mixture of extravagance and rigid respectability. She was a liberal at heart and, in some respects, even a radical, but she was deeply committed, nevertheless, to a regard for form and what is proper. For a few days, Joséphine, large, handsome, and young, seemed to be just the ticket for the nursery.

Nanny made no trouble at first, but the two Marias were tougher. They were cousins of a certain age, one called Marie and the other Maria to keep them straight, gifted with demoniac energy and a devotion to stirring up clouds of dust (which only settled back again after they had gone away), breaking dishes, and listening at keyholes, although what they gained by this I do not know, since all family conversation was conducted

in English, of which they professed not to understand a word. Above everything else, they were virgins, and, believe me, in France a virgin can be a virgin as in no other country on earth. A real French virgin can find more voluptuous pleasure in her profession than Nana or Zaza ever found in hers. The two Marias were like that. They were tough virgins. From the very beginning they claimed that they smelled a rat about Joséphine, although I imagine that their suspicions at first were based solely on Joséphine's healthy good looks, which after all are something of a traditional cause for suspicion in France.

The cook, Marguerite, was no trouble at all for Joséphine. Marguerite came from Périgord, was large, handsome, maternal, gay, and a wonderful cook. She was a widow with two grown sons and her attitude toward Joséphine was an understanding one. She believed that girls should enjoy themselves. She even kept the secret about the downstairs toilet window.

This window, like the others on the street side of the house, was protected by a heavy iron grille, which swung on hinges and was padlocked in place. The grilles were meant to keep out intruders, although later they failed notably with both Senegalese and Germans. They were not designed to keep people *inside* the house, or at least no one had thought of them in that

connection except Joséphine. She might, of course, have escaped to her nocturnal rendezvous by the front door or by any of the windows on the garden side, but there was something in Joséphine, some hidden instinct for drama, which made her prefer to climb out the barred window in the ground-floor toilet.

How soon these nocturnal excursions began after her arrival to wash diapers is obscure, but I suspect, from what we learned afterward, that she escaped to the ramparts, which were the local Grove of Apollo, the first night she spent in the house. At any rate, Marguerite, descending to the kitchen in quest of artichoke tea on one of the nights when she was suffering stomach distress, beheld through an open door the remarkable spectacle of Joséphine coming in through the window of the downstairs toilet at three in the morning. What pact was made between them, or whether Marguerite used the secret to exact some form of blackmail, I do not know, but in any case she did not reveal her secret until Joséphine later on betrayed herself by another singular outburst of her instinct for drama.

This happened on one of those rare evenings in northern France when it was too hot to sleep properly. The air was still and sultry, as if the whole world of Senlis were awaiting the Resurrection. Sticky dampness crept in at the open win-

dows. It was decidedly a dramatic and unhealthy night. Even the children, in the crowded nursery bedrooms, stirred, wakened, and called out for "a drinka water." By two, however, the house was quiet and the last child had mercifully had enough water and fallen asleep. Then suddenly the still air was rent by piercing screams interrupted by sentences at first incoherent with violence.

In no time at all the windows on the second and third floors were crowded with eager faces looking down upon a curious scene, dimly revealed in the glow of a distant gas light. On the bridge just below were the dim figures of a man and a woman. The man, in the uniform of a corporal of the local spahi regiment, stood leaning back on his elbows, watching a woman who stood on the railing on the opposite side of the bridge. Considering the performance of the woman, the attitude of the soldier was one of utter cynicism, for the woman, who kept jumping up and down, was shouting, "*Je vais me jeter à l'eau! Je vais me jeter à l'eau!*"

There was only one element which spoiled the drama of the scene and turned it to pure farce. It may have accounted for the cynical attitude of the soldier. The bridge rail was not more than eight feet from the surface of the water and the water itself was not more than two feet deep.

It is hard to say how long this

scene would have gone on entertaining its growing audience if the action of our neighbor, Monsieur Regnier, manager of the rubber factory, had not put an end to it. He was a large Frenchman of a disposition usually benign and phlegmatic, but the noise had wakened him out of the connubial slumber of a large double bed and he was mad. Leaning out of a second-floor window of the rubber factory, he bellowed "Hey, you!" in the voice of the Bull of Bashan. One good bellow was enough, for the woman stopped yelling and turned toward the window. Her arms dropped to her sides and she stood on the bridge rail, transfixed by the spectacle of Monsieur Regnier in his nightshirt.

When he had got her attention, the manager of the rubber factory shouted, "All right! If you're going to jump, jump! If you're going to kill yourself, go ahead, do it, but don't keep honest citizens awake with your bellowing!" And with that he slammed down the window to shut out the unhealthy night air.

Now, the speech of Monsieur Regnier was as French as possible. It was clear, deliberate, and logical. It respected the sacred rights of the individual. The woman certainly had a right to do away with herself if she chose; that was none of his concern. But she had no right to keep the neighbors up while she was doing it. Having stated

his position, Monsieur Regnier slammed down the window and went back to bed.

The speech made an impression; doubtless it appealed to the Gallic sense of justice and logic in the woman herself. Without another sound, she got down off the bridge rail and started off slowly up the street in the direction of the gas light. The soldier took his elbows off the bridge rail, lighted a cigarette, and followed at a little distance. As the woman came into the yellow flame of the gas light, we all recognized her as our Joséphine, who was supposed to be in virgin slumber in her room on the third floor.

Naturally, I was not the only one who recognized her. Two embattled virgins, the two Marias, hanging from their window on the third floor, were also familiar with the voluptuous figure and slow, hip-swinging saunter. They were downstairs in the dark waiting for her when she came in, a little before dawn, through the toilet window. The two Marias were fury incarnate. Their denunciations and her angry replies wakened the whole house.

But we kept Joséphine in our employ because the rubber factory was doing a booming business in its assault upon the French birth rate and there weren't any girls available to take her place. Driven by Nanny and the two Marias, I examined the grille covering the

toilet window. Joséphine had acted with admirable directness. She had simply smashed the padlock and thrown it away. The padlock was replaced on my orders by the two Marias, who spent quite a long time over the operation, chattering together like a couple of old magpies, but my principal reaction to the episode was one of admiration for the vitality and health of Joséphine, who could wash diapers all day long and roam the Grove of Apollo all night with non-commissioned officers.

After this episode there was a persistent and marked coldness between Joséphine and the two Marias. The attitude of Marguerite was friendly and unchanged; doubtless the episode brought up happy memories of her own youth. Nanny took a purely British and hygienic stand; the moral aspect did not concern her, but she disapproved of having the girl who washed diapers running about all night with spahi non-commissioned officers.

The summer passed and, what with padlocks and the consecrated spying of the two Marias, Joséphine appeared to be leading a more respectable life. But there we were deceived, for about three months after the scene at the bridge, Joséphine, as the result of carrying a heavy basket of freshly washed diapers through the back hall, had an accident, an accident which was indisputable evidence

that Joséphine had certainly got out somehow and sometime.

This time the two Marias, outraged, took matters in their own hands and sent for Alcide to remove Joséphine and all her worldly goods, which were not much, to her mother's cottage.

Alcide was himself a character. He was 75 years old and led a placid life, disturbed only by the necessity of harnessing his old white horse twice a day to drive to the station and meet the branch-line train that ran between Chantilly and Crépy-en-Valois. The old horse drew a small and battered omnibus, which bore a brass plate on which was inscribed *Carrosserie Benguet 1878*. Aside from its service to and from the station, the omnibus was hired on special occasions for wedding parties or by old ladies making their annual round of calls. Now the two Marias had summoned it to transport the enemy Joséphine to her home.

Driving back from Paris, I chanced to pass the omnibus with Alcide on the box. Inside I discovered the figure of Joséphine between two black-clad and indignant Marias. Although she was feeling none too well, her head was raised proudly and defiantly in consciousness of her great advantage over the two virgins. She looked for all the world like Marie Antoinette on her way to the guillotine.

It was Marguerite who explained

to me the disaster of the back hall. It was clear that she took the whole thing calmly and with detachment. When she had finished, she asked, "*Mais que voulez-vous? Cette Joséphine! C'est une manifestation de la nature! On ne peut pas changer une manifestation de la nature.*" Then she added, "*Les deux pauvres Maria!* They are eaten up with pride and envy." It was a curious choice of words—"pride and envy." The two Marias were proud of something they had kept which nobody ever wanted very much. They had made a kind of treasure out of it. And yet—somehow the envy came in, too.

That was the end of Joséphine so far as our household was directly concerned. By now we were inclined to take Marguerite's point of view regarding Joséphine as a "manifestation of nature," and that particular kind of manifestation simply didn't fit into our scheme of things.

Winter passed and spring came, and Joséphine, after a brief period of retirement, appeared again in the village streets, and as summer came on, it became clear that even her mother had not been able to keep her shut up. Glimpses of her at the market, at the Firemen's Annual Exhibition, on parade on the ramparts made it only too evident that this *manifestation de la nature* had been frequenting the Grove of Apollo once more. It was also well known that Joséphine had

no husband, although she was seen from time to time passing the time of day with a variety of gentlemen ranging from the coal man, who was rarely seen save in blackface, to the spahi cavalry sergeant. The sergeant was notable as an advance socially, since the highest rank hitherto attained by Joséphine was the corporal who watched her suicide attempt on the bridge with such cynical nonchalance. During all this period, the *manifestation de la nature* was as shameless as a volcano. Practically daily reports were brought back by one or both of the indignant Marias.

"*Cette femme!*" they would say. "*Cette créature! Quel exemple pour les jeunes filles bien élevées, pour les pauvres enfants innocents! Quel monstre!*" Their sustained and violent indignation caused a new high in damage to crockery and glassware. Tumblers, plates, cups, and saucers all became transmuted into Joséphines, and suffered accordingly.

Six weeks later, on a Sunday evening in June, Monsieur and Madame Verdeau were entertaining at a soirée. They were both musical—Monsieur Verdeau recited Verlaine and Baudelaire to the piano accompaniment of Madame Verdeau, and Madame Verdeau to her own accompaniment sang ballads in a fluty, uncertain voice. They were childless and lived on an income which steadily neared the point of invisibility. Their *soirées de mu-*

sique were held principally to give them an opportunity to recite and sing and to afford their friend, the Baron de Maricourt, a small man of about 65 and of no known sex, a chance to read aloud his latest poems or manuscripts.

The house of the Verdeaus stood near the part of the ramparts which had been leveled and made into a park—the part bordered by the cemetery and the commercially well-placed shop of the tombstone maker. The *soirée* at the Verdeaus was well under way and Madame Verdeau was singing *L'Esclave* in her fluty voice, a little off key, when she was interrupted by the appearance at the open French window of Joséphine's highly *enceinte* figure in a great state of agitation.

"*Venez! Venez vite!*" she was shouting. "*Un type vient de se suicider!*"

This alarming sight put a sudden end to Madame Verdeau's uncertain rendition of *L'Esclave*. Monsieur Verdeau, as master of the house, and the Baron de Maricourt, as the local Saint Simon, followed the stricken Joséphine to the scene of the hypothetical suicide. When they arrived, Monsieur Verdeau turned his electric torch upon the figure lying on the ground. There, in the circle of yellow light, lay the sergeant, dead as a door-nail, with a revolver by his side.

Joséphine was giving one of her best performances. "I begged him

to marry me!" she cried out. "I implored him! I swore on the head of my mother that he was the father of my child. He denied it. He said the coal man was the father and that rather than marry me he would commit suicide. And he did it!"

Here the Baron, after a glance at Joséphine's figure, interjected a pertinent but waspish remark, "And none too soon! But he'll do you very little good now as a husband or anything else."

The police were called and Joséphine was put away for the rest of the night in the cooler. During this procedure she continued to give a first-rate imitation of the performance of a tenth-rate actress. She wrung her hands, she wept, she called upon *le bon Dieu* as witness, and finally she walked proudly with upright head into her cell, pushing well in advance the evidence of her extremity.

The milkman brought the news to the two Marias on the following morning. He also brought the alarming information that Joséphine herself had purchased the revolver found on the scene of the "suicide." The two Marias were enchanted. They were triumphant. They were redeemed. Virtue had been vindicated as in the religious novels which were their only reading. "*Vous voyez!*" they kept repeating in turn. "*Vous voyez. J'ai toujours dit que cette fille était au fond meurtrière!*" Marguerite, the

cook, the cynic, the complacent, suffered deeply from their triumph.

The career of Joséphine was not finished. She was brought to trial in the assize of Beauvais for the murder of one Henri Wentz, sergeant of the eighth regiment of Moroccan spahis. The case was of course reported in the Paris newspapers as a *crime passionnel*. Joséphine's picture, taken in first communion dress (the only one available), appeared in the *Matin*, the *Petit Parisien*, and even in *La Petite Gironde*, in Bordeaux. Reporters came out from Paris to interview her and her mother, who, it developed, was not quite bright and had had a career of her own, which, however, never attained the dramatic heights of that of her daughter.

Under the Code Napoléon a prisoner is deemed guilty until proven innocent, and Joséphine, now relieved of her guilty burden, which had been delivered at the Clinique St. Joseph with the assistance of the same nuns who had stood as witnesses to her irreproachable character, appeared in court as a murderess.

Never had she given a better demonstration of what it is like to be a *manifestation de la nature*. Seated between two *sergents de ville*, she was dressed as a widow. She wore yards of cheap crape, with a tiny frill of white to frame her large-featured, florid beauty. Most of the time she sat with

bowed head, but occasionally she burst into dry, silent sobs.

During the questioning several interesting and somewhat damning facts came out. She was forced to admit that she was not quite certain whether it had been the coal man or the sergeant who was really the cause of her downfall. At this admission the prosecutor, a small, thin man with enormous handlebar mustaches, asked her, with practical French logic, why, when the sergeant refused to marry her, she had not tried to get the coal man, or even the corporal, who had appeared dimly in the background of the testimony. This, he thought, was a less painful course than murder.

Then Joséphine, after repeating tearfully that she was not guilty of murder but that the sergeant had killed himself rather than marry her, revealed herself in her true light, as a social climber. "I wanted to marry an officer," she said. "Anyone can marry a *porteur de charbon*."

The trial lasted three days. Monsieur and Madame Verdeau and the Baron de Maricourt were all forced to appear, flustered, scandalized, but delighted, to testify. Joséphine, in her widow's weeds, continued to play the rôle of a stricken Rubens widow, and to the unworldly, provincial taste of the jury this rôle made a great appeal. On the final day of the trial a notoriously lecherous elderly shop-

keeper in the front row was observed in tears.

Joséphine was acquitted, principally, I think, on the ground that although she herself had purchased the lethal instrument, no one was able to disprove her story that the sergeant wrested it from her hands when she meant to use it on herself and had destroyed himself rather than marry her. It was one of those cases in which the whole community believed the defendant guilty, but there was nothing to be done about it.

The outrage of the two Marias surpassed description. They raised their arms to heaven. The damage to crockery and glassware reached new and unbelievable proportions. In short, their tantrums, their ty-

ranny, their power of destruction became unendurable and they were fired. This, too, they took bitterly, calling upon God to witness how the evil triumphed and the innocent were persecuted. We never really escaped Joséphine until we got rid of the two Marias. I doubt that *they* have got rid of *her* yet.

Two days after she walked out of court a free woman, Joséphine married the coal man. This was clearly a marriage of convenience, *faute de mieux*, for it lasted only a week or two, after which Joséphine, depositing the child in her mother's care, disappeared. When last seen, the *manifestation de la nature* was heading for Paris to cash in on her publicity.



Roy Vickers

The Meanest Man in Europe

The saint-faced and ethereal Fidelity Dove once invented a new way of stealing a fabulous diamond; and once she stole the entire landscape of Swallowsbath—woods, hills, river, quarry, sawmill, village—the whole countryside! Now read how the modern Miss Robin Hood invented a new way of forcing an old Scrooge to pay a hospital bill . . .

THE CASE OF MR. JABEZ CREWDE gives us another reason to believe that Fidelity Dove was at this time developing a conscience. She did not make very much money out of Jabez Crewde. True, she cleared her expenses, which were, as usual, on the grand scale, and she paid herself and her staff well for their time. It was the Grey Friars Hospital which benefited chiefly by this exploit. You, if you are of those who refuse to believe that she had a spark of goodness in her, you may say that she simply indulged her sense of humour in making the meanest man in Europe subscribe twenty thousand pounds to a hospital.

Jabez Crewde deserved his title. He was worth close upon two hundred thousand pounds, which he had made as a financier—for which you can read moneylender; though he never took ordinary moneylenders' risks. Moneylender's interest—banker's risk—that

was the formula on which he had grown rich. He lived in a small, drab house in a drab quarter of Islington.

Fidelity never would have heard of him if he had not had a very mild attack of appendicitis. Feeling unwell one day, he had gone in his shabbiest clothes to the surgery of a struggling slum doctor. The doctor diagnosed appendicitis, and recommended an operation. Jabez was no physical coward, but he expressed the utmost horror. An operation would ruin him. So the doctor, having been persuaded to accept half a crown instead of his usual fee of five shillings, recommended the meanest man in Europe for free treatment at the Grey Friars Hospital.

It was a simple operation—the convalescence was short. It was during the latter period that Gorse, more or less by chance, got to know about it and related it to Fidelity. Fidelity crossed her hands across

the bosom of her dream-grey gown and sadly shook her head.

"Avarice is the very leprosy of the soul," she said. "I am revolted, Cuthbert."

"For once I feel myself able to echo your sentiments," said Gorse. "He's worth about a couple of hundred thousand."

"Those poor, underpaid doctors!" said Fidelity. "And the overworked nurses! And the needy cases crying for admission—or is it perhaps a wealthy hospital?"

"There's a notice up saying if they don't get twenty thousand in three months they will have to close a wing," said Gorse.

"They have given their skill unstintingly to a suffering fellow creature. They have but cast their bread upon the waters—"

"Fidelity!" groaned Gorse. He would have died for Fidelity, as would any other member of her gang, but he alone believed her to be an utter humbug.

"My friend, you are always cruel to me, though you love me," sighed Fidelity. "And because I love you, I must please you. Listen, and tell me if this pleases you."

"I'm listening," grunted Gorse, and waited.

Fidelity's voice, when she spoke again, held the low call of birds at dusk.

"Tell Varley, our jeweller, to buy fifty thousand pounds' worth of pearls from the best firms he can," she said.

Gorse brightened.

"I thought you'd get down to brass tacks sooner or later, Fidelity!" he said, and left the room to carry out her order.

Jabez Crewde had the usual handful of spare-time agents, and it took no more than a few days for Fidelity to contrive that one of them should approach her. Within a week of her conversation with Gorse, she was sitting timidly in a dingy room in the drab house in Islington, which served Mr. Crewde for an office as well as a living-room.

"I—I have heard that you were ill and I hope you are better," said Fidelity in the tone of one who desires to placate a moneylender.

"I *have* to be better, Miss Dove," answered Crewde. "In these hard times I cannot afford a long illness. What do you want me to do for you?"

"I—I understood you were a financier," began Fidelity, "and I am in a difficulty which you will understand even better than I. A friend of mine, who knows all about stocks and shares, has told me that if I could invest five thousand pounds now it would be worth *thirty-five* thousand in a few days."

Jabez Crewde had no difficulty in suppressing a smile. It was a part of his profession to listen to fantastic tales.

"Go on, Miss Dove," said

Crewde. "As long as you're not going to suggest that I should lend you the five thousand."

"Oh, but I was going to suggest just that," said Fidelity. "You see, I have not the five thousand pounds, and it seems such an awful pity to miss this chance. I don't know anything about money, but with thirty-five thousand pounds I need never think about it again. That is why I am so anxious to avail myself of this opportunity."

Mr. Crewde's eyes strayed to Fidelity's bag. It was of grey brocade—a dainty, home-like affair that suggested knitting and mothers' meetings and little rewards for good children.

"Are you offering any security?" he asked.

"You mean stocks and shares," divined Fidelity. "I'm afraid I haven't any. The only thing I have of any value is the jewellery my great-uncle left me. I must not sell it, and—in my sect we do not wear jewellery—so I thought that if I were to leave the jewellery with you and pay you back when I have the thirty-five thousand pounds—?"

"Have you any idea what the jewellery is worth?" asked Crewde, while Fidelity produced and opened a number of leather cases.

"It was valued at the time of my uncle's death," said Fidelity. "The assessor said it was worth a little over fifty thousand pounds. It seemed to me terrible that so much

money should be spent upon adornments."

Mr. Crewde began an expert scrutiny of the pearls. He was inclined to agree with the assessor as to their worth. He was inclined to think, now that he had taken stock of Fidelity's perfect grey tailor-made and her little white hat, that she was an extravagant and helpless fool.

"They are good pearls, though they're not worth anything like that at the present time," he said presently. "And I don't as a rule lend money upon jewellery. Have you no other securities?"

"None whatever, I fear," said Fidelity in dejection.

That was what Mr. Crewde wanted to know. It is of little use to a moneylender to have a very valuable pledge on a small loan if the client has other securities, because the pledge can always be redeemed. But when the very valuable pledge represents the only security, it is reasonably certain to pass into the hands of the moneylender—especially when the loan is made for the purposes of a get-rich-quick scheme.

"Oh, well, I don't know I'm sure!" Mr. Crewde was muttering with professional reluctance. "Everybody seems to be borrowing money just now. How soon do you expect your—er—your profits to come in, Miss Dove?"

"My friend said in six weeks' time," answered Fidelity.

"Six weeks! H'm! I might just be able to manage it."

Fidelity began to thank him.

"You're quite sure you can pay it back in the six weeks, mind?" challenged Mr. Crewde.

"Oh, perfectly sure," exclaimed Fidelity. "My friend was most positive."

"Very well, then," said Mr. Crewde. "I'll put that into writing and I shall ask you to sign it. If you will come here to-morrow at this time, I'll have the agreement ready for you, together with the money."

Fidelity barely glanced at the document on the following day. Its numerous clauses and penalties had no direct interest for her. She signed the document, gave a receipt for the cheque, took a receipt for her pearls, and left the dingy house in Islington.

She had borrowed five thousand pounds at sixty per cent. interest on a security of pearls worth fifty thousand pounds.

The meanest man in Europe was very pleased at his latest deal. Twenty years' experience had taught him that Miss Fidelity Dove would return in six weeks with a tale of misfortune and beg a renewal of the loan. In a year, with careful manipulation, he would be able to sell the pledge for his own profit without advancing any more money. He was elaborating a scheme by which he could save excise stamps on the numerous

documents that would be used in the transaction, when his clerk brought him a card.

"*Mr. Abraham Behrein.*" The address was in Hatton Garden.

He nodded, and the caller was shown in. Behrein was a well-dressed man of dignified appearance. He greeted Jabez with elaborate courtesy.

"I have come to ask a favour, Mr. Crewde," he began. "I have reason to believe that you had a business transaction yesterday with a lady—a Miss Dove."

"Well, what of it?" demanded Crewde. "She's turned twenty-one."

"Quite so!" said Behrein. "I simply wished to ask if you would allow me to look at the pearls she deposited with you. I am aware that the request is most irregular, but—I have reasons."

"What reasons?"

"I do not care to name them."

"Well, that's an end of it. Certainly not!" snapped Jabez Crewde.

"You refuse?" asked Behrein with an air.

"Of course I do. Grant, this gentleman can't find the door!"

Jabez Crewde was more than a little disturbed by the incident. Not so Behrein. Behrein got into the taxi that was waiting for him and drove to Scotland Yard.

Here he again presented his card, explained that he was a dealer in precious stones, and stated that he had been robbed. He

wished to speak to a responsible official who would take up the case. There was a short delay, at the end of which he was shown into Detective-Inspector Rason's rooms.

"A short time ago," explained Behrein to the detective, "I bought a parcel of pearls of an approximate value of fifty thousand pounds. It is a big parcel, Mr. Rason, in these days, and my purchase attracted a certain amount of attention. I had many opportunities of unloading, but I was not in a hurry. A lady, not in the trade, was introduced to me in the belief that she might purchase the entire parcel for her personal use.

"The lady encouraged the belief. She came twice to my office to inspect the pearls and to discuss methods of purchase. Her last visit was on Monday of this week. She was a very pleasant, very well-bred lady, and when I was wanted on the telephone I had no hesitation in leaving her for a moment in possession of the pearls."

Detective-Inspector Rason grunted. He knew well enough what was coming. An oft-told tale!

"My client," continued Behrein, "renewed her expressions of approval, said that she had some final financial arrangements to make, and would call upon me in the following week. This morning I wished to show the pearls to another customer—I had not handled them since the visit of the

lady—and I find—a parcel of pretty good imitations, worth possibly one hundred and fifty pounds. I cannot, of course, prove anything, but I am certain that the lady in the case made the substitution while I was answering the telephone."

"Did she give you a name?" asked Rason.

"She gave me the name of Fidelity Dove," said Behrein, "with an address in Bayswater, which I have no doubt is a false one."

"The address is right enough," Rason rapped out. "She's probably waiting for us to call. She's the coolest crook in London and then some. She never bothers to run away. I've been on her track a dozen times and she always manages so that you can't prove anything. In a way, she's a great woman."

"That is not very consoling to one who looks like losing fifty thousand pounds as the result of her ingenuity," said Behrein bitterly.

"We shall take the matter up, of course," said Rason.

"Then perhaps I could help you," said Behrein. "Chiefly by chance, I happen to know that this lady—if it be not absurd so to call her—borrowed money upon the security of pearls from a Mr. Jabez Crewde. I'm quite sure of my facts. Mr. Crewde underpays his staff, and—er—"

"Quite so," said Rason.

"I was at his house in Islington half an hour ago," continued Beh-

rein. "I asked, with all civility I hope, to be allowed to look at the pearls. He received my request very ill-temperedly and refused it."

Detective-Inspector Rason made a note.

"Did you tell him your suspicion?"

"I would have explained had he given me time," said Behrein. "As it was, I was being shown out of the place before I could explain anything."

"I have here," continued Behrein, "photographs of the pearls, together with an expert description. If you have means of forcing Mr. Crewde, these papers will dispose of any doubt."

"Of course, we could get a search-warrant if necessary," said Rason. "But we always avoid unpleasantness of that kind if we possibly can. I think it very likely that I could persuade Mr. Crewde to show me the pearls of his own accord."

"Would it be possible for me to accompany you?" asked Behrein. "I could tell at a glance."

The detective agreed to this readily enough, and in half an hour Behrein was again at the house in Islington, this time accompanied by Rason.

When Jabez Crewde found himself confronted with a police officer, he "saw the light" and made no further bones about producing the pearls.

He laid them out on the table, but before he had finished, Behrein intervened.

"These are my pearls, Mr. Crewde," he said. "I could produce a round dozen experts at an hour's notice to identify them. If you care to peruse these documents, you will be satisfied yourself. I—I am very sorry for you."

"Your pearls! What the dickens do you mean?"

Behrein re-told the story of the substitution of the pearls. The end of the story left Crewde babbling incoherently.

"Given that Mr. Behrein can substantiate his account," said Rason, "he will be able to obtain the pearls from you by an order of the Court, as they are stolen goods. Do you wish to take the matter up on your own account, Mr. Crewde?"

"Yes, of course I'll take it up!" snapped Crewde. "No, I can't afford to pay a lot of thieving lawyers. It's a matter for the Public Prosecutor. I'll give evidence if you'll pay me for my time."

"I take it, Mr. Behrein, that you will prosecute," suggested Rason.

"I have no alternative," replied Behrein. "If you will tell me how to proceed—"

Rason was about to speak, and checked himself.

"If I were you," he said instead, "I'd proceed very carefully, Mr. Behrein. It looks a clear-cut case. But there have been one or two

cases before against this particular lady that have looked just as clear-cut. If you like to charge her, of course I must take the charge, but I suggest that you wait till I've seen her."

Mr. Behrein bowed.

"As you please," he said. "You understand these things and I don't. I would like to have a private word with Mr. Crewde if he will allow me."

"Right!" said Rason. "I'll get along to Miss Dove."

"It looks," said Mr. Behrein when the detective had left, "as though you and I, Mr. Crewde, are going to be let in for a great deal of expense and a great deal of wasted time. Are you at all willing to discuss an arrangement?"

"What arrangement can we make?" demanded Crewde. "You are on velvet. I've lent five thousand pounds on those pearls. You can get them from me for nothing by an order of the Court."

"Well, Mr. Crewde," said Behrein indulgently, "I feel that we business men must hang together when we're up against this kind of thing. I have no desire to stand on my rights at your expense. I'll be frank with you. I have a prospective purchaser for those pearls and time is of the utmost importance. If they are going to be held up three months as exhibits in a trial—to say nothing of a civil action between you and me, which I would profoundly regret—I shall lose my

customer. I think—well, now, I won't beat about the bush—I am content to carry the five thousand loss. If you like to hand those pearls to me, I'll give you a proper receipt and five thousand pounds and take my risk of getting my money back."

Jabez Crewde could scarcely believe his ears.

"Eh? What's that? Haven't quite got you," he muttered, and Behrein repeated his offer.

"Of course," said Behrein laboriously, "you will lose your profit on the transaction—but you will have lost that in any case—together with your principal of five thousand pounds. As you admit, I can get the pearls returned to me by an order of the Court. I had hoped that you would accept my offer—"

"I do accept it," said Crewde in haste.

Behrein took out his wallet. "One has to carry large sums about one in my trade," he explained, and counted out five thousand pounds in notes.

He added a formal receipt for the pearls and left the meanest man in Europe trembling with relief at being spared the loss of five thousand pounds and the necessity of appearing in Court . . .

It was nearly lunch-time when Detective-Inspector Rason arrived at Fidelity's house in Bayswater. Fidelity, exquisite in grey taffetas, asked him to stay to lunch. Politely, he declined.

"You constantly refuse my invitations, Mr. Rason," she told him, her violet eyes clear and shining as a child's. "And you cannot have come on duty this time."

Rason made a grimace.

"I have come on a clear-cut case against you for jewel-robbery, Miss Dove," he said. "But I'm old enough now not to attach too much importance to that fact."

Fidelity's smile was seraphic.

"All the same," continued Rason, "I'm taking a pretty keen professional interest in this particular case. I've been trying to guess how you're going to keep out of prison this time, and I'll admit I've clean failed."

"There is an elusive suggestion of flattery in your words, Mr. Rason," reproved Fidelity. "And flattery falls strangely on my ears. Let me confess I cannot in the least understand what you are saying."

"Yesterday morning," said Rason, with a sigh, "you pledged with Mr. Jabez Crewde pearls which on Monday you are alleged to have stolen by means of substituting false ones from a Mr. Abraham Behrein. Mr. Behrein has photographs of the pearls and expert descriptions. They have been identified as the pearls you pledged with Mr. Crewde."

"Mr.—what is the name of the other gentleman—Berlein?"

"Behrein," said Rason. "Are you going to deny knowledge of him, Miss Dove?"

"Yes," said Fidelity. The word had all the sanctity of a vow.

For a moment there was silence. A look almost of fear flashed into Rason's eyes.

"May I use your telephone?" he asked.

Fidelity's little bow gave consent. Rason fluttered the leaves of the telephone book, looked for Behrein, and could not find him. He rang up the Holborn police.

He gave particulars of himself, and then:

"Abraham Behrein," he said, and gave the address in Hatton Garden. "Send a man at once to verify name and address. 'Phone me here." There followed Fidelity's number.

In a quarter of an hour, in which Fidelity spoke gracefully and well of pearls as mentioned in the scriptures, there came the return message. Abraham Behrein was unknown in Hatton Garden.

"And now, Mr. Rason," asked Fidelity, "are you going to apologize for doubting my word?"

"No," said Rason. The emphasis of his refusal left Fidelity's gravity undisturbed until he had left her drawing-room; but as he crossed the magnificent hall silvery laughter followed him and rang in his ears long after he had left the house.

On the next day Mr. Jabez Crewde was severely startled at being told that Fidelity Dove was at

the door and wished to see him.

"Show her in, and run for the police," he whispered to the clerk.

Fidelity came in, gracefully as ever. She inclined her head in the *souçon* of a bow.

"Oh, Mr. Crewde!" she said in clear tones. "I do not know how to thank you! The money that you lent me must veritably have been bewitched. The scheme was successful beyond my friend's wildest dreams. So much money has been made that—is it the firm or his stockbroker?—has advanced on account of my profits all the money I borrowed from you, and I have come to repay you five thousand five hundred pounds."

"Let's have a look at it," said Crewde coarsely.

"But of course I wish you not merely to look at it but to take it,"—and Fidelity laid the notes on the table.

Mr. Crewde counted the notes.

"You can leave those there," he said, and glanced towards the door. Then, for safety, he picked them up and put them in his pocket. Fidelity looked offended.

"Will you give me a receipt and return my pearls?" she asked.

"We'll see about that in a minute," snapped Crewde.

"Against my inclination, I am driven to believe that your manner is intentionally offensive," said Fidelity. "I will wait no longer. The receipt is of no importance, for my bankers have the numbers of the

notes. You will please return the pearls to my private address."

"Your private address! Yes, I know it—Aylesbury prison it'll be in a week or two," jeered Crewde. "As for the pearls, they are back with Mr. Abraham Behrein, whom you stole them from."

"Oh! How can you—" Fidelity produced a handkerchief.

"Tell it all to the policeman," invited Mr. Crewde as the clerk returned with a constable.

"What's all this?" asked the constable.

"That's the woman you want. Fidelity Dove, she calls herself," shouted Crewde. "Scotland Yard knows all about her."

The policeman looked embarrassed.

"Do you give the lady in charge, sir?" he asked.

"No, I don't give her in charge," said Crewde. "I'm not going to be mixed up with it. It's a matter for the Public Prosecutor."

"We've no orders to arrest any one of that name as far as I know," said the constable. "I can't take the lady unless you charge her, sir."

"There is my card, constable," said Fidelity. "My car is outside if you care to take the number."

In the car Fidelity drove home.

As soon as she had left, Jabez Crewde telephoned to Scotland Yard. He was put through to Rason, who informed him that all efforts to trace Abraham Behrein had failed.

"It was a hoax of some kind, I'm afraid," said Rason. "But you're all right, Mr. Crewde. You have the pearls, I take it? It was apparently a swindle that didn't come off."

"But she's paid me back the money I lent her, and wants the pearls back," protested Crewde.

"Well, I can't advise you," said Rason. "But I should have thought the best thing to do would be to give them to her."

"But I haven't got them!" yelled Crewde. "I handed them to Behrein—they were his—and he gave me the five thousand I'd lent her."

"O-o-oh!" said Rason. It was a long-drawn sound that held a world of meaning.

"What's the good of saying 'oh,'" raged Crewde. "You're a pack of fools, that's what you are," he added, after he had replaced the receiver.

On the next morning Jabez Crewde received a letter from Fidelity Dove's solicitor, Sir Frank Wrawton, demanding the immediate return of the pearls or their value in cash, which had been estimated by competent experts at fifty thousand pounds.

By eleven o'clock Jabez Crewde had learned that Sir Frank Wrawton was empowered merely to give him a receipt for pearls or the cash equivalent.

By twelve o'clock he was at Fidelity's house in Bayswater.

He was received by Fidelity in the morning-room.

"I've been thinking about this," he shouted at Fidelity, "and I can see what's happened. That Behrein, as he calls himself, is a confederate of yours. You two are in it together. I'll show you the whole bag o' tricks. You bought those pearls—they were genuine. Then you borrowed five thousand from me, and paid back five thousand five hundred. You dropped that five hundred. Then your confederate dropped another five thousand in getting the pearls from me. That's five thousand five hundred you've dropped—and for that outlay you've landed me with a liability for fifty thousand pounds. Why, you probably had those pearls hidden away an hour after Behrein left me, and you'll sell them again quietly later on—"

"Have you also been thinking, Mr. Crewde, how you are going to establish this terribly slanderous theory in a court of law?" asked Fidelity, nun-like and serene.

"Bah! The lawyers are robbers, like the police—"

"And the hospitals?" asked Fidelity.

Crewde looked very nearly startled.

"They call you the meanest man in Europe, Mr. Crewde," said Fidelity. "I alone have maintained that that is a slander. I want you to prove my words. You owe me fifty thousand pounds. To dispute my claim would merely mean the loss of another thousand pounds or so

in lawyers' expenses. It is a pleasure to wring money from a mean man, but it is no pleasure if the man be not mean. The Grey Friars Hospital requires twenty thousand pounds, I understand."

"Eh?" grunted Crewde. "I don't get you. D'you want me to give them twenty thousand?"

"If you will write a check for twenty thousand pounds to the Grey Friars Hospital," said Fidelity, "I will withdraw one-fifth of my claim against you. Twenty thousand to the Grey Friars Hos-

pital, twenty thousand to myself—and I will give you a receipt for fifty thousand pounds."

"That's close on fifteen thousand pounds clear profit to yourself," said Crewde, a ghastly pallor spreading over his face.

"You may phrase it so," said Fidelity. "Or you may say that I am offering you ten thousand pounds to remove from London the reproach of harbouring the meanest man in Europe. . . . Ah, I see you have no fountain-pen. I beg you to use mine."

Cornell Woolrich

Cinderella and the Mob

In his mystery novels Cornell Woolrich deliberately subordinates every facet of technique to what he calls "the line of suspense," and few critics would deny that at the top of his form Mr. Woolrich can distill more terror, more excitement, more downright nail-biting suspense out of even the most commonplace happenings than nearly all his colleagues-and-competitors-in-crime. But Cornell Woolrich has more than one string to his bow. Here, for example, is an atypical Woolrich novelette—but we doubt if your enjoyment will be one whit less, and we doubt if, once you've started, you'll be able to stop short of the very last word . . .

THE WHOLE FAMILY JUMPED ON me at once. You'd think I was a mere child or something, instead of sixteen. You'd think a person would have some rights on a Thursday evening. You'd think school work was the most important thing in the world.

You'd think—well anyway, you'd *think!*—

Father said: "Not with that sore throat you've got, young lady! We'll tell you all about the picture when we come home."

Mother said: "And even if she didn't have a sore throat she'd stay home tonight! She's got to study some of the time."

And of course Fran, my older sister, who wasn't going with them but was going out with her this-month's beau, had to put her two cents' worth in too. "When I was

your age—" she started to say.

"Oh, sure," I sighed wearily, "back in those Roman times things were different."

But it didn't do a bit of good. They all got ready and they all went out, and there I was stuck with a lot of books again. The last thing I got told was, "Now, remember, I expect to find you in bed when we come home. No running over to Betty Lou's house!"

The front door went *bang!* and I was Cinderella again.

I gritted my teeth and opened my history book, but I couldn't see a thing in it for a long time, just waves of red. "Isn't something exciting or glamorous ever going to happen to me?" I seethed. "Do I have to be about twenty, and all bent over and rheumatic, before I even begin to live at all?"

And then, like it was just waiting for that much encouragement, the phone started to ring. I knew it was probably Fran's boy-friend calling to find out what was keeping her so long; she was the only one who ever got phone calls in our family.

First, I wasn't going to bother about it—let him ring—but it kept on until it got annoying, so I went out to it.

"Hello," I croaked, and between what the sore throat had done to my voice and what the family had done to my disposition, I must have sounded like someone sawing wood.

It was a man's voice, but it wasn't Fran's boy-friend. He sounded sort of—I don't know how to put it—confidential, as if he was talking out of one corner of his mouth and didn't want anyone but me to hear him. He said, "Hello, is this Chicago Rose?"

For a minute I was so surprised I just blinked, and then before I had a chance to tell him I wasn't, he rushed ahead, as if he was afraid I was going to hang up before he got through saying what he had to.

"Listen, you don't know me, Rose," he said, "but it's all right; Eddie gave me your number. You know, Eddie Dubois back in Chi. He wrote it down for me before I came away; I mislaid it just now, but it didn't matter; I had it memorized anyway. He told me you'd

sound just like you do, like you just had your tonsils taken out."

I'd kept trying to tell him, through the whole thing, that he must have the wrong number, but he was talking so fast I couldn't even get one good-sized word in.

And then it started to sound intriguing, so I changed my mind. I looked at it this way: every added five minutes I spent at the phone meant that much less time I'd have to spend over those poisonous books afterward, so what did I have to lose?

He said: "There's a bunch of us just in and we got a little job for you. Your kind of job, y'know, Rose? The kind of stuff that made you famous in Chicago."

"Oh," I said. Which is a pretty safe word.

"You'll get a cut," he went on, like he was trying to coax me.

He didn't say where, but I looked at my arms apprehensively; who likes to have to wear court-plaster? "Well, if it's all the same to you—" I started to say.

"Oh, I see, cash on the line ahead of time. Well, we'll do it your way then, Rose." Then he asked, "Are you warm right now?"

I felt my forehead. There *was* a good deal of heat coming up, Father had shaken up the furnace before he went out. "A little," I said, "but not enough to bother me."

"As long as you're not red-hot it's okay. Now listen, Rose, I can't give it to you over the phone, natu-

rally. How's about coming out to your place?"

I looked around me and I rolled my eyes to myself. I could just imagine *their* faces if they came home and found—

"No," I said quickly, "I don't think you better do that." Was I having fun by now! This had the dates of the English kings beat all hollow.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Ain't you paying protection these days? Well, all right, make it anywhere you say, Rose."

I'd never met anyone at all until now, except Betty Lou, and I always met her in Gilman's drug-store down on our corner, right by the soda fountain. I couldn't make it there, because that fresh Willie Smith who tends the fountain knew me awfully well, and besides I owed him thirty cents for back sodas and he might humiliate me by asking for it.

"You name the place," I said.

"I'll park on Main and Center," he said. "How'll that be? Northwest corner; you can't miss me."

That was all the way downtown, and it kind of scared me for a minute; if they ever found out that I went that far downtown at this hour, I'd never hear the end of it. Even in the daytime that was out of bounds.

But I remembered I didn't really have to go; I could just tell him I would and then never show up, so it didn't matter. "Okay," I said.

"I'll tell you how you'll know me," he said. "I'm wearing a very light lid, almost the lightest—in town. I'll keep turning it around in my hands, like I was looking at the band."

"Well, uh, did—" I kept trying to remember that name he'd used at the beginning, and couldn't. "Did he tell you what I look like?"

"Eddie Dubois? Naw, only that you're red-headed and an eyeful."

I glanced in the hall-mirror next to me, covered up a snicker with my hand. "Well, I changed that a couple weeks ago. I'm blonde now."

He didn't seem surprised to hear that, as if all the girls he knew were always doing that to their hair. "Oh, sure, I know how it is. You just gimme the business, I'll know you."

I could tell he was getting ready to leave the phone, and I knew I ought to tell him that I wasn't Chicago Rose, that he'd been speaking to the wrong party the whole time; but I didn't have the nerve any more, after waiting this long.

The last thing he said was, "Make it as soon as you can, huh, Rose; don't keep me waiting there on the open corner too long, it's not healthy." Then he rang off."

I hung up with a sigh. It had been the most interesting conversation I'd ever had, and I hated it to be over. Now I'd have to go back to those bum books waiting

there all over the dining-room table.

I sighed again. I was wishing I really was Chicago Rose; I bet she didn't have to study civics and go to bed at eleven on week-nights.

Then I thought: I *could* be if I wanted to, just for a few minutes. He doesn't even know what she looks like himself. Or I could just go down there and take a peek at him from around the corner and then come straight back again. And that way, my study time would be all used up and it would be too late to bother with these books any more tonight.

And before I knew it I was upstairs in Fran's room, looking her things over.

I took down one of her old evening dresses and put it on. It didn't fit so good, so I pinned it tight behind me and that made it fit better. But my face looked too babyish sticking up out of it. So then I opened the bureau drawer and found a black crayon I'd watched her use sometimes and made rings around my eyes.

That helped a little, and then I spread on all the powder and rouge she had there, until hardly any real skin showed through anywhere.

When I got through it didn't look so awfully good maybe, but at least it didn't look like me any more.

I found a pair of her shoes and put them on too, because my own

all had low heels. We both wore about the same size. They kind of threw me forward, like standing on stilts, until I got the hang of them.

Up to now I'd been just sort of play-acting. You know, like you do when you're twelve, dress up in grown-up clothes and make believe you're going somewhere. I didn't really think I'd have the nerve to go.

But as long as I was all rigged up like that, it seemed a shame not to go down there and take a peek at him just for fun. Then I could tell Betty Lou all about it tomorrow in class, and we'd have a lot of fun over it.

I knew I'd be back long before they came home from the movie at half-past eleven—I'd have to be—but just to be on the safe side, in case Fran had a fight with her boy-friend and came home early, like sometimes happened, I put a laundry bag full of old clothes under the bedcovers to make it look like it was me lying there all cuddled up. With the light out you couldn't tell the difference.

Then I went downstairs. I fell down the last three or four because I wasn't so steady on those extra-high heels yet, but what was a little thing like that? I just got right up again and straightened myself out.

I put out all the lights and then I watched carefully from the front door, to make sure none of the neighbors were at their windows

or out on the sidewalk just then, to see me come out.

As soon as I was sure the coast was clear, I ducked out. I had my own key, that I used in the daytime to let myself in when I came home from school, so I wasn't worried about getting in again.

I walked fast until I got away from our house, and then I slowed down a little, so as not to attract attention.

What made me get in the cab was an accident. I mean, I made the first block all right without meeting anybody, and then this cab showed up and started trailing along next to me, on account of how swell I was dressed, I guess.

"Cab, lady?" the driver said. That gave me a thrill; it was the first time anyone had ever called me "lady." But of course I didn't need a cab; it was only thirty blocks from our house down to where he'd said he'd be, and that's not much of a walk. So I just shook my head politely.

Then the very next minute Mr. and Mrs. Jurgens, who lived right next door to us, turned the corner not ten yards ahead and started to come straight toward me. There was no chance to get out of their way. Luckily the cab was still there, right next to me. I gave kind of a sideways jump, and before I knew it I was in it.

The Jurgenses went right by without even looking at me, but before I could get out again, the

cab had picked up speed and was on its way, so there didn't seem to be anything to do but go ahead and tell the driver where I was going.

He kind of looked up sharp when he heard how scrapey my voice was, and then I saw him squinting at all the make-up on my face, in the rear-sight mirror. After a while he asked, kind of friendly and understanding, "How's business, sister?"

I didn't know much about business, only what I heard my father say, so I repeated an expression I'd heard him use to my mother lots of times.

"It's been so long since I made a sale," I said solemnly, "that I might just as well give my stock away to the Salvation Army!"

He looked kind of surprised at such a thought, but he shook his head sympathetically.

When we got near Main and Center I said, "Stop in the middle of the block, before you get all the way to the corner." I figured that way I could edge up to it and peek around it without him seeing me.

When he did, I got out and said cordially, "Well, thanks ever so much, it was awful nice of you to bring me all the way down here."

He said, "Wa-a-ait a minute, what is this?" And he started to climb out after me real slow.

I didn't like the look on his face, so I started to back away little by little. Then when I saw him spit on

his hands and rub them together, I turned and started going real fast.

But I made the mistake of looking back over my shoulder the whole time, and that way I forgot to watch where I was going. He took a jump and started sliding after me, like on an ice-pond. I gave a squeak and turned away too late.

My whole face went *spiff* into somebody's chest. It was hard, too, like a barrel; I nearly saw stars for a minute.

I got around behind him, hung onto him, and said: "Make him go 'way! I didn't ask him to ride in his cab, he asked *me* if I wanted to."

By the time I saw him stoop over to pick up a very light ice-cream-color hat he'd dropped, it was too late. He said, "I guess you're Rose, by that voice alone."

Then he laughed and said, "Same old Rose. Eddie told me about that trick of yours of getting out of cabs before they stop, and then when the drivers turn around to collect the fare they find the back seat empty. Only you seem to have gone sort of kittenish with it."

He shoved a bill at the driver and growled: "Gedouda here before I wrap the crankshaft around your neck!"

What a growl that was! Like a sea-lion in the zoo.

Then before I knew what was happening, he had me by the arm and I was all the way over at a big

black sedan waiting at the opposite curb. "Come on, Rose, I'll take you around to meet the boys."

"Y-you been waiting long?" I quavered. The only reason that kept it from sounding as frightened as it was, was how inflamed my vocal cords were, I guess.

"Plenty ~~#&lc#~~ long!" he said. I'd heard two of the words before, but the other one was brand-new. Something told me this wasn't a very good time to tell him I wasn't Rose, that maybe I better put it off a little while, until a better opportunity came.

There were two other men in the sedan, one at the wheel, one in back. He introduced me, but only after we were already under way and I was firmly wedged on the back seat between him and one of the two others.

"Here she is, boys. Trigger, this is Rose. Rose, meet Oh-Johnny."

It seemed a worse time than ever to bring up about not being Rose. But compared to what it was going to be like later, if I'd only known it, it was practically ideal.

I said, "I don't even know *your* name yet," to my original acquaintance. There didn't seem to be any harm in that.

"I'm Blitz Burley," he said, like he was supposed to be famous or something.

They seemed to do their best to be agreeable to me, as if I was someone who might be valuable to them later on. The one called Trig-

ger said, trying to make polite small-talk, "I b'lieve a moll I used to go around with knew your older sister in the Women's Reformatory at . . ."

And the one next to me asked considerably: "Does my shoulder-sling bother you the way we're sitting? I'll move it out of the way if it does."

"Huh," Blitz said scornfully before I could answer, "she probably curls her hair with a repeater every night, don'tcha Rose?"

I didn't exactly know what they were talking about, but the sensible thing to say seemed to be: "I used to but I found out I wasn't getting the best results that way." So I said it.

By this time we'd got to where they were bringing me, so we all got out. There was one pressed close on each side of me, and the one called Oh-Johnny was right in back of me. I don't think they meant anything by it, they were just being sociable, but the only place I could have got to by breaking away suddenly from them and running would have been where we were going anyway, so there didn't seem to be much sense to that.

It was some kind of a hotel, but it wasn't a very presentable or tidy one. They went in the side way so they wouldn't have to pass anyone, and up to a door on the third floor. It had an elevator, but they walked up.

Blitz knocked, in a funny way. Two quick ones and two slow ones. The door opened in a funny way too. First, just a ribbon of orange showed, as if someone was looking out with just one half of one eye. Then it opened all the way, and we went in one behind the other.

Trigger was going to go first, but Blitz, who had very good manners, knocked him out of the way with his elbow and said, "Ladies first."

"Why?" Trigger asked.

"I dunno; I suppose so if there's a rod waiting behind it they get it first and you got time to draw."

There was another man on the inside of the door just finishing putting something away; I guess it was a handkerchief in his back pocket. There were also two more men in the room, playing cards at a table. I was now surrounded by six of them.

I still thought it could wait a little longer, to tell them I wasn't Rose but just Penny Richards of Thomas Jefferson High School. Maybe till I got outside again, for instance.

There was a clock staring me in the face across the room, and it was already twenty after ten by now. I had less than an hour left, if I wanted to get back home before the family came in from the movies.

And to make matters worse, I'd lost track of just where we were, they'd driven in such a confusing,

roundabout way coming over; I didn't know how long it would take me to get back from here.

I kind of stood there in the middle of them and they all sized me up. This was the first time they'd got a good look at me under a real bright light, even Blitz. He slapped his side and said: "I gotta hand it to you dames, I don't know how you do it these days! If I didn't know better, I could eat my hat you were only a twenty-year-old chicken just breaking in."

"Yeah," another one nodded. "Wudje do, Rose, have the old muzzle lifted on you?"

But they didn't waste any more time over that. They all pulled up chairs and kind of moved in close around me, like they were going to have a conference. Blitz said, "Okay, have a drink, Rose, while we're giving this to you."

First, I said yes, because a nice cherry phosphate or something would have gone good right then; all that sticky lip stuff of Fran's had made me feel parched. But what he handed me was tan and tasted like gasoline sprinkled with red pepper. When I got what was left of my blistered tongue safely back inside again I said no, I'd changed my mind, and handed it back.

"She's right," somebody spoke up. "Not when she's on a job."

"All right, now here it is, Rose," Blitz said, sitting down and hitching up his trousers at the knees.

"We got a guy all nicely fingered-up for rubbing."

I shook my head hopelessly to myself, without letting them see me, before he even went any further. Out of that whole sentence he'd just given me, I only knew what the first four words meant.

I suppose I would have known more about it if I'd followed some kinds of movies more closely—they reminded me a lot of some people I'd once seen in a movie—but the kind I went to mostly were love pictures, where they didn't talk that way at all.

"He come here from Chicago, and we come here after him," he went on. "He don't know we're here yet, and he thinks he's pulled a curtain down after him. But even so, he's cagey; he's wise as they come. We can't get him out in the right spot where we can get at him easy. And then there's another reason why we ain't dropped him yet."

I knew what that word meant, at least. It's when you stop associating with somebody, snub them. Like when I dropped a girl last year in my French class because she always laughed every time I got up to recite.

"Now, he's gettin' it because he lammed out with the whole haul instead of splitting the way the agreement was. I was doing a little time right then, and a couple of the other boys had a little heat on them, and I guess he thought it was

too good an opportunity to pass up.

"Well, he'll find out his mistake. But that don't do us no good, see Rose? First we gotta find out what he did with the haul. If we don't, once we dust him off, we can kiss it goodbye; we'll never see it again. That's where you come in."

What good is it when a person keeps talking and you don't even know what they're saying? I had the hardest time not yawning in their faces; I only kept from it by closing my mouth tight and pushing the yawn back, because I knew it would be bad manners. I'd been scolded enough at home for doing that.

The whole thing wasn't even particularly glamorous, just sort of over a person's head, like some things in civics. I was beginning to wish I hadn't come. It hadn't turned out to be as much fun as I thought it would be.

"Now he's a pushover for a dame. Always has been. But she's got to be his kind of dame, not just any dame at all. Machine-gun slugs can't drag a word out of him. But give him his head with a dame and he'll start talking. If she's the right kind of a dame, and he has confidence in her.

"The only thing which has saved him so far is that he goes for a peculiar, sweet, milk-fed type which has gone completely out of circulation; you can't find 'em any more. Enough of 'em have tried to

be that way with him, but it don't go over; he can spot a fake a mile away.

"So you can see this ain't going to be an easy job; Rose. He's no fool. The minute a girl acts like she's too wise, he starts putting up his guard. And in a case like this, if he ever tumbles we primed you for this, it'll be curtains for you!"

I couldn't see much inducement in that. What'd I need curtains for anyway? We had plenty at home, on every window.

I looked at the clock. It was quarter to eleven now. I didn't see how I was going to do it, and still get home safely ahead of the family. "About how long will it take?" I asked doubtfully.

"That depends entirely on how good you are, Rose," Blitz said. "If he falls at all, he falls hard and right away—he's that kind of a guy. If he once gets his fur up and starts suspectin' you, you'll never get anywhere in a week."

I thought maybe I better just say I would do it, and then go straight home and not pay any more attention to them at all, once I was out of here. I hate arguments, and some of their faces looked kind of mean and ugly.

"All right," I sighed unenthusiastically.

"Now, we know where he's holed up, and we'll plant you where he can't miss you; we got everything worked out. The first thing you gotta do is find out what

he done with that haul. Naturally, he ain't going to spill that easy, not even if he thinks you're his kind of dame. So here's how you work it. There was some ice with it. Not much, it was mostly lettuce. But anyway, there was a little ice with it. The idea is, wherever the ice is, the dough ain't gonna be so far away.

"You tease him for some ice. If you've made a dent at all, he'll come across without thinking twice. That'll tell us what we want to know. He wouldn't bank it, accounta it's hot. It's a cinch it's around some place, not very far from him.

"Now the rest of it's simple. He'll wanta take you out. You see to it that he makes it the Jingle Club—" He stopped and grinned at me. "Djever hear of that before?"

"No," I said truthfully.

"No one else ever did either, before tonight. We're opening it specially for his benefit, just for this one night. It's a dummy, get it? Everything is all fixed, just waiting for you to show up there with him. The waiters, the couples dancing, even the guys playing in the band are all props, so don't be surprised when you see them start easing out one by one, leavin' you all by yourselves.

"It's your job to keep him from noticing what's going on around him. You won't be left uncovered, don't worry. Every knothole will

be plugged up with lead. We're doing this thing right. Now have you got it all straight?"

Straight? It was a complete blur as far as I was concerned; as bad as one of Mr. Peabody's dry lectures on a spring day when you're not paying attention.

Just about four or five words out of the whole thing were floating around loose in my head, without any meaning. *Ice. Jingle Club. Rubbing. Curtains.* "Uh-huh," I said vaguely.

"Whether you wangle the location of the haul outta him before or after you get to the Jingle Club don't matter, just so long as you wangle it. You be the best judge of that yourself. Soft music and dim lights sometimes help to loosen a guy up too, y'know."

I perked up a little at that, for the first time. "Oh, is there going to be music and dancing there?"

"Yeah," he answered dryly. "First there'll be music and dancing, for a front. Then as soon as you get up from the table for a tip-off that you've got the goods on the haul, there'll just be music without the dancing."

They all sort of smiled at that. But what did I care? If there's one thing I'm crazy about—I started bouncing up and down on my chair. "Oo, I wish I was there already! I can hardly wait!"

He looked encouragingly at the others. "See? She's rehearsing already. Only, don't overdo it, Rose.

You almost act too young, you almost act like you was on'y about sixteen. Don't let him spot you for a phoney or—"

I remembered that from the time before. "Curtains," I said placidly.

He rested his hand on my shoulder for a minute. "Babe, you got guts, all right."

They all started to shove their chairs back, like it was over. For my part I was glad; it hadn't been a bit interesting.

The last thing Blitz warned me was, "And for Pete's sake, Rose, when you do get up—to go back and powder your nose or whatever the stall is—stand good and clear of that table, or Heaven help you. It'll be wood one minute, Swiss cheese the next."

That was childish, talking that way; how can a table be wood one minute and cheese the next?

They were all kind of waiting, watching me. I didn't know what I was supposed to do next, so I didn't do anything, just sat on there without moving. A look of enlightenment crossed Blitz' face. "Oh, I get it!" he said, and reached in his pocket and took out a bunch of bills. Before I knew it, they were in my folded hands.

"What do I do with this?" I asked, puzzled.

"Okay, Rose, okay," he said soothingly, like he didn't want any argument and took out some more and added to them to what I was holding already. "That ought to

hold you. And you can keep whatever ice he gives you."

Now I ask you, what good is keeping ice? In half an hour, all you've got is water.

They stood me up and looked me over, turning me around like a top. "Maybe she ought to scrape off a little of that plaster of Paris," one suggested. "She looks weird, like a housepainter's assistant."

"Naw," Blitz interposed hurriedly, "if she takes any of that off, her real age'll probably show through. This way she's just about right; she'll get under his skin. She gives the impression, kind of, of a school kid trying to act grown up."

With that, they all started to get ready to go out. Only instead of straightening their coats around their necks, like most people do, they all started smoothing and patting them down under their arms, like they had on woollen underwear that scratches.

Blitz gave them their final orders. "Okay, boys. Now, Trigger and me are going over with her. The rest of you go to the Jingle and get in position. You all know your places.

"Al, you take the pantry doors. Biff, you're in the dummy phone booth, down out of sight. Oh-Johnny, you're behind the bar. Spike, you take it from above, through the ceiling; we got a sight-hole bored through. Me and Trigger'll seal up the front, once the stooges are out of the way.

"We're gonna have a truck outside dumping coal down a tin chute; you know how much noise *that* makes. There won't be a sound heard."

Meanwhile I was still clutching this bunch of bills in my hand. I thought it would be a good opportunity to get rid of it some place around the room while their attention was all taken up listening to him; I mayn't know lots of things, but I know enough not to take money from strangers.

I noticed a box with cigarettes in it on a table near the door, so I slipped it in there and closed the lid, when no one was watching.

But after they already had the door open, and half of them were already outside in the hall, the last one to leave must have reached into the box for a cigarette. He suddenly said: "Hey!" and stood there pointing down to the money.

They all moved so swiftly and so silently, like big cats, you could hardly follow them with your eyes. Before I knew it, I was back inside the doorway again, and they were all around me in a ring, squinting hard and holding their hands under their arms.

"Y'weren't going to double-iggy us, were you, Rose? Is that why you left this behind?" Blitz asked. His lips had turned sort of white.

I seemed to be the only person in the whole room who wasn't all excited and shaking. "I was going to come back for it later," I ex-

plained coolly. If they were going to get that worked-up about my refusing it, I supposed I'd have to pretend to accept it.

They all took deep breaths and kind of relaxed. "Oh," Blitz explained, relieved, "she don't want Brennan to catch her with that much dough on her while she's around him. That's all it is, fellas. He might smell a rat."

We all went down the stairs and out the side way again, me in the middle of the six of them. I kept thinking: "I've *got* to get away from them soon, I can't stay much longer; I'll just get in ahead of the family by the skin of my teeth as it is."

Anyway, I didn't like them much any more. The novelty had worn off. They were too quarrelsome and touchy, and I only understood about one word out of every three they said to me. I hadn't had a good time at all, the whole time I was up there with them.

Outside the hotel four of them left us, went down to another car standing waiting further down the dark street, and Blitz and myself and Trigger got in the first car.

I had made up my mind that the quickest and easiest way of getting away from them, instead of going into a lot of wrangling and explaining, was to let them take me over to this other man they'd been talking about all evening, whoever he was. It wouldn't take more than five or ten minutes longer, and that

way I'd get rid of them, first of all.

Then instead of having two people to get away from, I'd only have one, and it would be a lot simpler. I hadn't pretended to him I was Chicago Rose in the first place, so I wouldn't have to go ahead doing it.

I'd just say, "I'm Penny Richards from Jefferson High School and I was sent here to take you to the Jingle Club so you could get curtains, but you can just go over and get your own curtains, I'm going home!"

And if he didn't like it, he could lump it!

So I just sat still between them on the front seat and bided my time. If Betty Lou could make any sense out of this whole thing, when I told her about it tomorrow, she was better than I was, that was all.

On the way Blitz said, "Y'nervous?"

I thought of how late it was getting to be and what a calling down I was going to get if I ever got caught sneaking in at this hour, so I admitted: "A little bit, not very much."

"Who wouldn't be?" Trigger said. "Until she gets him into the Jingle she's out-talking a thirty-eight every inch of the way, with no one to back her up. He'll drop her in a minute if he wises onto her. It's him or us, and he knows it."

Being dropped by someone I hadn't even taken up with yet wasn't going to worry me any. But like everything else they said, there wasn't any real sense to it.

They stopped finally around at the side of a great big building with a lighted glass shed over its entrance. I guessed it was another hotel; none of these people seemed to have any homes of their own.

"We're just in time," Trigger said. "That's his car waiting there, he'll be coming out in a minute."

Blitz said to me: "Y'know how y'gonna connect with him, don'tcha?" He sounded like I was a telephone wire. "Shoot out around the corner and let his fender throw you as soon as he turns on the ignition. You know how to work it so you won't get hurt, y'used to be in the fake-accident racket in Chi."

"No, I—" I quailed.

Trigger made that pawing gesture under his coat again.

"Just stage-fright," Blitz assured him tolerantly. "She'll be over it in a minute. All right, get out and get ready for your dive, Rose."

They stood me up between them against the building wall, just back of the corner. Trigger kept watching around it. Blitz kept hold of me by the arms. It was dark around there where we were.

Trigger gave a sudden cut of his hand. "Here he comes now."

Blitz tightened his grip, turned me around and pointed me out to-

ward the gutter that fronted the hotel. "No," I whined.

"He's in," Trigger whispered. There was the sound of a motor turning over, out of sight around the corner. Wheels started to slither.

"Okay, you're on the air, Rose," Blitz grunted. He gave me a sudden shove out away from him, like I was a volley-ball. I went staggering out across the sidewalk trying to keep from falling flat on my face, and the big headlights of a car were coming to meet me from the side.

I couldn't stop short of the gutter; the sidewalk was too narrow; and the car and I both got there at the same time.

I remembered something he'd said about grabbing the fender, and as I went down I caught at it with both hands and lay flat on top of it instead of going under it.

The car stopped short—it had hardly begun to pick up speed anyway—and I rolled off the fender and sat down on the ground in front of it.

A man with a leathery tan face and silver hair jumped out and came running around to me. "A you hurt, miss?" he asked, picking me up. Then when he saw I was all right, he got kind of sore. "You should look where you're going; you could have been killed."

"Somebody pushed me," I insisted tearfully. I looked over where Trigger and Blitz had been, but

there wasn't anyone there any more.

The doorman, who had come over to us, growled: "Ah, they always say that, Mr. Brennan."

Brennan looked around, said: "Help me take her into the lobby a minute, Joe, before there's cops around asking a lot of questions. I don't want the papers mentioning my name and address."

They helped me in between them. I looked around over my shoulder just before we stepped through the revolving door. I wasn't sure, but I thought I could make out a slice of ice-cream-color hat-brim sticking out around the corner down there.

I sat down and rested in the lobby for a minute and the doorman brought me a glass of water. Then Brennan stood up, said: "Wait a minute, let's see if I can't square this with you."

I didn't know what he was talking about, and I didn't care.

He sat down over in the corner and wrote something, then came back with a scrap of light-blue paper and tried to give it to me. "Will fifty be all right?"

"Fifty what?" I said. Then when I saw that it was a check, like my father brings home sometimes, I pushed it back at him, told him politely but firmly that I wasn't allowed to take money from strangers.

He acted for a minute like he couldn't believe his ears. "How old are you?" he asked.

I was kind of tired pretending I

was Chicago Rose by now; I hadn't pretended I was to him, anyway, so I didn't have to go ahead. "Sixteen and two months," I said defiantly.

He nodded to himself and murmured: "You'd have to be, to turn down money like you just did." Then he looked at me kind of skeptically. "You dress kind of old for your age. Well, if you won't take this, can I offer you a drink?"

"Yes," I said eagerly. I almost never seem to get enough refreshments.

He frowned a little and his eyes got squinty. "Come on in the bar," he said shortly.

I'd never been in one before. It was just like a soda fountain, only it didn't have faucets. He whispered something to the man behind it and then he left me sitting there.

"You go ahead," he said. "I've got a phone call to make."

The man brought two of those rotten tan things that I'd already made the mistake of tasting over at *their* place. And then he brought the most irresistible pink malted you ever saw, and left it standing by itself a couple of chairs away from me, like it didn't belong to anyone. So of course I moved off down there where it was and started in on it.

Just when I got down to where the straw was gurgling at the bottom, I turned around and Mr. Brennan was standing there without a sound watching me. "That's another way of telling," he said.

We went back in the lounge and sat down again. He asked me how I happened to be going around, at my age, all dressed up like that and with all those crayon-marks on my face.

"Well, they all went out to the movies and wouldn't take me with them," I started to explain, "so I got sore and went up to my sister's room—"

"I understand," he smiled, "just making believe, like little girls do."

I was going ahead to tell him the rest of it, how Blitz had called our house by mistake and everything, but just then I happened to get a look at a clock across the way and it said 11:25. That drove everything else out of my hand.

I jumped up and started edging away from him. "I'll have to go now, they'll be back any minute."

"Won't you stay just five minutes longer?" he urged. "I always wanted to have a little daughter of my own, to take her around and show her the sights. We could go some place where there's music and dancing—"

But I started to run without waiting to hear any more. Was I going to get it when I got home! I pushed out through the revolving door and then I stopped short.

Blitz was standing there down by the corner, leaning back against the wall waiting, with his hat pulled down over his face and smoking a cigarette.

I looked up the other way and

Trigger was standing up *there*, waiting the same way.

They both saw me, and they both started to take a slow step toward me. But they didn't have time to finish it; I turned around and went in again as fast as I'd come out.

Mr. Brennan was still sitting there, sort of day-dreaming about having a little girl like me, I guess. I went back to him and said: "I guess I will stay a *little* while, after all."

The damage was done now anyway, the family was almost certainly home by this time. The only thing left to do was wait a little longer, until they were safely in bed and had the lights out and *then* go back.

He brightened right up and said: "Swell! Now, it's no fun here. Let me take you some place where you'll enjoy yourself."

Then he looked at me sort of helplessly. "I don't know much about showing a little girl your age a good time. It's kind of late for amusements like parks or movies. Where would you like to go?"

I remembered that place they'd spoken of, the "Jingle." I wouldn't have suggested it if I could have thought of any other, but I couldn't, and he kept waiting to hear me say where I wanted to go, so finally in order not to seem a complete fool who didn't even know where she wanted to go herself, I mentioned it.

His eyes got that narrow look

again for a minute and he said: "Have you ever been there before?"

"No," I said, "I just happened to hear somebody speak of it."

His face cleared again and he smiled. "Oh, I see, Cinderella wants to pretend she's grown up, just for one night, is that it? All right, we'll see if we can find it and we'll go there."

We went out and got in his car. This time you couldn't see a sign of Blitz or Trigger around, but when we flashed past the corner I could see that car they'd brought me in still standing there in the gloom, so I knew they weren't far away.

I was going to tell him all about them—I really liked him much better than them by now—but he seemed so happy to be taking me out, as if I was really his daughter, that I hated to spoil his evening for him, so I decided not to. The best way to treat mean people is to ignore them, not mention them at all.

He had a little trouble finding the "Jingle," because no one seemed to have heard of it before tonight, but finally a taxi driver told us where there was a new club being opened, and when we finally found it it turned out to be the one, all right.

It was in a creepy sort of dead-end street, up against the river, and there was a coal truck standing there backed up against a sidewalk grate, but it hadn't dumped its load yet, was just waiting.

We drew up outside and a man with a lot of brass buttons came over and opened the car door. Brennan said, "Haven't I seen your face somewhere before?" and the man got kind of confused, but told him he must be mistaken.

Then Mr. Brennan turned and looked at me, and asked: "Are you still sure you want to go in?" I could hear music coming out, and the colored lights looked so cozy, I couldn't resist. I told him yes, I'd love to.

"Well, I couldn't be wrong about *you*," he said to himself; but out loud: "If you've got me fooled, I'm sure slipping and I deserve to be bagged." So we got out and went in.

It was small, but it had the prettiest colored bulbs strung all around, like a Christmas tree, and a few people sitting at tables all dressed up pretty, and two couples dancing.

It was the first really glamorous place I'd been in all evening, and when he saw how my eyes were shining and how thrilled I was, he sort of relaxed.

"Why does it have to be that table?" he asked, when the waiter tried to take us over to a certain one against the wall.

"That's the only one left; all the others are reserved, only the people are late getting here," the waiter said.

So we went over and sat down. The waiter asked us what we'd

like to have. "Double choc'late soda," I said instantly.

Mr. Brennan sighed, "Ah, Cinderella, Cinderella, everything seems magic to your eyes."

After I'd finished my soda and we'd been sitting there a while, one of those disconnected words they'd used came back to my mind. *Ice*. But I didn't ask him for some because they'd told me to, but because I really was kind of dry and sticky. It certainly was close in there.

For a minute his face changed and he gave me that same squinty look again, and his hand even went in toward his coat, like those other people's had all the time. Then he said very quietly, "Sure, you can have some ice."

When the waiter brought it, he kept watching my face very closely, like he wanted to see what I'd say about it. Well, all I said was "Thank you," because it was just like any other ice I'd ever had. I started to crunch a piece between my teeth.

He dropped his hand down again and gave me a funny kind of a smile. "I thought you meant the other kind," he said. "I'm so used to—"

"What other kind is there?" I asked him. He seemed kind of silly.

"You wouldn't know about those things, Cinderella. But there is another kind. I've got some of it, and I've got a lot of green money, and

there's some men I left behind me in Chicago would give their right arms to know where I've got it. I'm going to let you in on my secret, Cinderella, because I know it's safe with you."

He smiled some more. "We came here on it."

"How could we? It isn't snowy on the streets or anything."

He laughed, chuckled me under the chin. "It's in the tires of the car, all packed in cotton wool."

That wasn't so terribly interesting; I couldn't see why they'd wanted to find out so bad. I was going to tell him about them, that they weren't in Chicago at all but right here, and that I'd been with them myself just before I met him; but he went ahead talking and I didn't have the chance. I've been brought up never to interrupt people until they get through.

When we first came in there'd been two couples dancing on the floor. Then after a while there was only one. Then there weren't any, but the music kept on playing.

There wasn't anyone sitting at the tables now any more either, and I hadn't even seen them get up to go. But the colored lights shone down mostly in the middle of the room, so you couldn't tell so easily what was going on around the sides.

The music kept sounding thinner and thinner, as if each time there was one less instrument, and then finally there was just one man left, picking away at the piano soft

and low. Then before you knew it, he must have strolled outside to rest a while; there was silence. The waiters had disappeared too. We were the only ones left in the place. There was a lull, like when something is going to happen. I couldn't tell, because I'd never been in a lull before.

And Mr. Brennan was so taken up talking to me, he didn't seem to notice anything going on around him. I seemed to have got him into a sentimental, reminiscent mood. He was giving me his life story.

"I'm sorry now for all the laws I've broken and all the things I've done, but it's too late. If I'd married and settled down and had a sweet little girl like you for a daughter in the beginning, instead of going after the quick money—"

Then he stopped and looked at me and asked, "Am I rubbing you the wrong way, by telling you all these things about my past?"

"No—" I started to say. But that expression reminded me of something from earlier in the evening. "Mr. Brennan," I asked curiously, "excuse me for interrupting, but what does it mean when they speak about *rubbing* a person?"

"It means to kill someone. But the way I used it just now—"

My mouth opened wider than it ever had before, made a great big round O, and I put both hands at once over it.

He saw something was the matter. "Ah, I've frightened you," he

said penitently. "I shouldn't have told you that."

"Curtains," I whispered hoarsely through my hands; "what do curtains mean?"

"Curtains mean a person's end."

"Mr. Brennan, you've got to listen to me!" And I told him the whole thing, everything that had happened from the time Blitz first rang our house by mistake, until they'd pushed me in front of his car.

"I didn't mean to do it!" I whimpered. "I didn't know what I was doing, I didn't know what they meant, until you told me just now!"

For a minute he was altogether different. He was like they were, mouth all twisted and white, eyes hard as buttons.

"So they've got me sewed up, have they, thanks to you?" His hand went in under his coat. "Well, I'll go—but I'm gonna take you with me."

"Where to?" I asked wonderingly. "We can't get out—"

He sighed, and little by little his face went back to what it had been like before. He shook his head a little sadly.

"No, I guess you didn't know," he said. "Such thickness couldn't be faked; it must be the McCoy."

"Listen, Cinderella, I've got to go anyway; but they'll let you through. You get up and slowly walk away from the table, like you hadn't just told me.

"I won't give you away, I'll act like nothing was the matter. They

might get tired waiting and give it to you with me, if we both sit here much longer."

"But that's the signal, it'll begin the minute I do that." I swallowed hard, but I wouldn't budge. "No," I said, "I didn't mean to, but I brought you in here. I'm not going to get up and walk away. I'm going to stay here at the table with you. They'll—they'll have to rub us both, I guess."

"But aren't you scared?"

"Oh, awfully," I whispered.

His hand dropped back to his lap again. "You saved yourself that time," he said. "I would have dropped you before you got a foot away, if you'd taken me up on it. But now I see that you're on the level. That's the last time tonight I doubt you. I guess it's the last time tonight for anything."

We didn't say anything for a minute or two. It was awfully quiet in there; you could hear a pin drop. I had a creepy feeling like eyes were watching me, but I couldn't tell where they were coming from. After a while I asked, "Will it hurt much?"

"We're probably good for another few minutes sitting here," he said, "so let's think this out. Don't look around, Cinderella, just bend your head like you were listening, and I was talking to you like I was before."

"And don't talk too loud," I warned him under my breath. "Another thing I forgot to tell you,

there's a hole right over us in the ceiling and one of them's up there."

His eyes didn't go up at all. He just took out a very shiny cigarette case and looked at the inside of the lid while he helped himself to one.

"Yeah, there is," he said, quietly. "I can see the rim of a gat-muzzle pointing down through it, right into the middle of my brain."

He took a careless puff and went on: "Now Cinderella, the lights are our only chance. This place was rigged up in a hurry, just for tonight. The wiring is all strung around on the outside of the walls, not covered up; see it? It must be plugged into a master outlet at one certain place, this whole circuit of colored bulbs. Let me see if I can find where that is, first of all."

His eyes roamed around indifferently like he didn't have a thought in his mind. "Talk to me," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

"Three times three is nine," I pattered desperately, "four times three is twelve, five times three—"

The family didn't seem so awful to me right then; I was wishing I was back with them. But I couldn't get up and go. They'd shoot him.

"I've found it," he said. "Porcelain too, like I hoped. Now I've got to hit it squarely with just one shot, and blow the whole place to darkness. I've got to have a chance to draw and sight. Are you afraid of the noise of a gun, right up against your face?"

"I never heard one before."

"Then lean over me, from across the table, and pretend to be taking a cinder out of my eye. I'm gonna try to aim and fire with your body covering me, so they won't-see me unlimber."

"Now listen close, Cinderella. I don't think we can make it, but at least we'll take a try. Throw yourself flat on the floor and crawl along it the minute the lights go. Don't lift your head an inch, but *swim* for it. You're young and supple, you ought to be able to move fast even that way."

"There's no use trying to get out the front way, into the street. That's where they'll expect us to head for and that's where they'll point their fire. I'll hold mine after that first shot, to keep from showing them where we are."

"We'll make for the back. There must be stairs back there some place, leading up into the building over us. We'll try to get up through it and over the roof."

"Turn your head slow and place the direction you're going in, for yourself, while you still can see. It's that middle opening in the shadows back there, between the dummy phone booth and the door."

"And if you once get out okay, don't wait for me. Hotfoot it all the way up, as high as you can go."

Then he said, "Are you ready, Cinderella?"

"I'm ready," I said, clenching my two hands down at my sides.

He smiled to give me courage.
"Then here we go, Cinderella."

He blinked his eye and pretended he'd got something in it. I leaned over him, pretending to help him get it out. Once I happened to glance down, and he had a big monster of a black gun out in his hand, wedged between the two of us, right under my chin. It was turned out, toward where that main light-plug was.

The last thing he said was, "In closer, Cinderella; there's someone over us too, don't forget."

So I leaned as close to him as I could, and by then I was nearly crying.

Something went *boom* right under my face like a lot of dynamite, and all the lights went out. I didn't have to drop like he told me to. I got such a fright when the thing went off right under me, I fell all the way over backwards, flat on the floor.

So then I just rolled over and started wriggling fast toward where I'd last seen that back door.

I heard the table we'd been at go over with a crash, and one of the little pieces of ice that had been on it hit me on the back of the neck and made me go even faster.

Meanwhile, the whole place was full of starry flashes, like there was a terrific lightning storm going on.

They came from all over—from behind the bar, from the telephone booth, from the front door, and even from the ceiling.

I heard Blitz' voice suddenly yell in from somewhere outside: "Get her too, you guys, she's ratted on us!"

I was nearly over at the back door by now. I was glad that dress of Fran's I'd borrowed was black and didn't show up in the flashes that kept streaking around me. I couldn't tell what had happened to Mr. Brennan, whether he was down on the floor or flat up against the wall somewhere.

And then suddenly my head and shoulders wedged in between somebody's straddled legs. He was standing there with his feet spread out, firing over me toward the front doorway.

I was so scared I didn't know what I was doing. I grabbed hold of a leg with both hands, pushed with all my might to try to shove it out of the way. It kicked up in the air, somebody yelled and fell over on the floor right next to me with his whole weight.

Then I stood up, ran into the door with my hands out in front of me to guide me, flung it open and ran out into a back hall. It wasn't much lighter than in there where we'd been, except for a tiny point of flickering flame over a wall gas-jet.

But at the end of it I saw a flight of stairs and I ran toward them for all I was worth and started up without waiting for him, like he'd told me to.

I went up one whole flight, and

around the landing, and halfway up the next flight; and then I stopped and stood there in the gloom, listening and leaning over to see if he was coming. My heart was going so fast it nearly made as much noise as all that shooting down there.

Suddenly he came out, backwards and crouched over low, and just before he backed away from the door he fired once into the dark, smoking room behind it.

Then he turned and sprinted as far as the foot of the stairs, and there he turned and crouched and fired again, to keep them back, because they'd seen him go and were trying to come out after him.

While he was standing there like that, with his back to the stairs, a shadow suddenly came out onto the landing between him and me—I guess the one that had been planted at the hole in the ceiling over us—and I caught the glint of a gun, raised and all ready in his hand. He pointed it square down at Brennan, at the back of his head.

There wasn't even time to yell a warning to Brennan, because by the time he turned to look up at me it would have been too late.

Somebody had left a painful of garbage standing there on the step below me. I grabbed it up with both hands and flung it down there at the landing where he was with all my might.

I didn't even aim it, I was just lucky I guess. It hit him right in the

side of the head and keeled him over sideways, and the gun went off into the ceiling, and eggshells and vegetables poured all over him.

Brennan turned and looked up. "Good work, Cinderella!" he yelled. Then he came running up, and stooped and snatched the gun up without stopping as he went by. He caught up with me, grabbed me by the hand, and started to tow me along with him.

They kept firing as they came up after us, but they couldn't get us in a straight line, because the stairs broke direction every flight and turned back on themselves.

When he'd finished using all the shots in his own gun, he threw it down at their heads and used the one he'd taken from the other man.

We got up to the roof door finally. It was locked, but he fired a shot at it and blew it open, and then we were out on the roof, running across it.

We skimmed over a low partition ridge between the two buildings and got to the skylight hutch of the other house. They'd come out after us by now and were firing at us from the first roof door. You could hear little things like wasps go humming by your ears.

The hutch here was locked like the other, but this time he couldn't blow it open because the padlock was on the inside.

"I'll get it," he panted, "the wood's rotten. Grab me by the coat if it caves in."

He backed up and took a run at the door, and crashed his whole shoulder into it. It shot in, and if I hadn't grabbed him by the tail of the coat like he'd said, he would have gone down the whole flight of stairs inside.

He swung around and hit the side of the framework. Then he righted himself and we started down through the new house. A lock of my hair fell off, like something had snipped it loose.

A minute later they got to the roof door we'd just come in by, and started firing down at us from up there. But again the zigzagging of the stairs saved us.

And then, just as we'd got halfway down through the house and it looked like we'd be out in the street in another minute, a shot came up at us from *below*.

We both staggered to a stop and looked over the rail. Faces were grinning up at us from below, more of *their* faces. Some of them had been told by the others what we were trying to do, and had come in from the street to head us off. They had us blocked.

Another shot came up, and we both snatched our heads back.

"A whole army," he said bitterly, "just to get one man and a girl!"

"Everyone in there was in on it," I told him. "I heard them say so; waiters and musicians and all."

We couldn't go back either; the others were coming down behind us from the roof.

"Quick!" he said. "See if they'll let us in one of these flats here; it's our only chance."

I turned away from the stairs and ran down the long hall pounding at door after door with the flat of my hands.

"Open! Help us! Let us in—oh, *please* let us in!"

He stayed behind there on the landing to keep them back a little longer.

I could hear people behind some of the doors, but they were too scared to open up, on account of all the firing that had been going on for the past ten minutes or more.

Frightened voices jabbered back at me, "Go away! Leave us alone!" And I heard one woman saying frantically—I guess she had a phone in there with her—"Quick, send over all the men you have. There's something terrible going on—two people being murdered here in the halls."

"Shoot in one of the locks—*make* them—" I pleaded to Brennan.

Something made a clicking sound in his hand. "I have no more left," he said, and he aimed at someone's head coming up, but with the back part of his gun, and then pitched it like a baseball.

There was only one more door left and then the hall ended, and then they'd just come into that cornerpocket after us and shoot us down, slow, over and over and over.

I rained slaps all up and down

this door, and all of a sudden it swung in loose; the flat behind it must have been vacant.

"Brennan!" I squealed. "Here!"

And I jumped in there, into the dark. A minute later he scuffed down the hall, turned in after me, and got the door closed on the two of us.

The shooting out on the stairs stopped, and you could hear feet slithering along the hall toward where we were. And in the sudden stillness I heard Blitz' voice say: "It's all right, take y'time, boys. We've got them now, he's out of slugs."

Brennan said: "See if there's a fire escape outside any of those windows behind us. I'll hold the door against them until you get down."

I ran from one to the other, flattening my nose against the grimy panes, swallowing dust and cobwebs, peering down. I didn't find one until I'd gone two empty rooms away.

I tugged at the warped window until I'd got it up. A shot thudded in there where he was, sounding like it came through wood or something.

I turned away from the window and ran back to him through the dark. "Hurry up, I've found one!"

"Too late, Cinderella," he grunted. He was still holding the door, but he was sagging lower on it now. "Quick, get down it, I still can hold this—"

"I'm not going to leave you up

here," I said. "I like you too much for that."

"Game little Cinderella," he coughed.

Then the door swept back, carrying him with it, and about five or six of them walked in, one behind the other. They were just black silhouettes first, against the hall light.

Blitz' voice said, "Bring a light."

Someone turned on a flashlight and shone it on Brennan, making a big moon against the wall for him to die in. Blitz looked down at him where he was lying against the baseboard, and he took careful aim and fired.

Brennan jolted against the baseboard as if a nail had gone into him. I screamed and ran at Blitz, but they caught me and threw me back.

"That's for dishing us out of our share of the Chicago racket money. Now, where is it?"

Brennan just smiled sleepily.

"All right, you Rose, did he tell you where it is?" They pulled me forward again and threw me at him, and switched the light on me.

"I'm not Rose and I never was!"

"We know that now and it's your tough luck. But did he tell you where the haul is?"

Brennan's voice said brokenly from somewhere in the dark: "Tell them I did, Cinderella."

"Yes," I said into the dazzling torchlight.

"Out with it then, hurry up! Where is it?"

I waited, listening. Brennan's weak gasp came again. "Don't tell them yet—hear me? Hold out as long as you can, they won't touch you as long as—"

He was trying to save my life.

Blitz snarled, "We'll see how long she can hold out!"

He grabbed my arm, wrenched it up behind my back until I thought I'd nearly faint. I went crashing down on my knees, pinned to him backwards.

Brennan's voice pleaded, "Don't—don't—promise to let the kid go and I'll tell you—"

One of them warned Blitz excitedly, "Come on, we gotta get outta here, don't you realize that?"

"Not until I put one into this interfering brat!" he raged. He let go of me and I tumbled forward on my face and rocked there on the floor, rubbing at my shoulder, looking around at him.

I saw his arm stretch out toward me, and the torch caught the gun at the end of it and made it shine.

I could hear Brennan trying to reason with them, but I was listening for the sound of the shot, not his voice.

The flash came from too far back behind Blitz, way back in the hallway. Blitz went up on his toes first and seemed to get twice as tall as he was, then he started to come down on me, leaning over more and more, and finally he fell flat right on top of me and pinned me there.

For a minute a puff of hot breath stirred my hair, and then it stopped and didn't come again.

They must have made the mistake, Blitz' gang, of all crowding into the room around us, to watch and hear what went on, and left the street doorway and the stairs unguarded.

For a minute or two the whole thing started over again, just like before; flashes everywhere and thunder and feet running in all directions trying to get out. I wound my arms tight around my head and buried my face in them.

It didn't last as long as the first time; it ended right away. Lights came in, and there were heavy thuds as guns dropped to the floor.

I raised my head and saw some of them standing with their hands up. Some more came in that way from the other room, with policemen behind them.

Someone was lying still on the floor in there; I could see his feet sticking out.

A policeman's face bent down close and peered at me. "She's just a kid!" he gasped in surprise.

"Mister," I begged weakly, "will you please get this man off me so I can get up?"

"Didje get them all?" somebody asked. "How about the two that got down the fire escape?"

"They're both lying down there in the backyard now. The first one missed his footing and pulled down a whole section of the rusty thing

with him. The second one just went down clean—”

They were bending over Brennan, and I heard him whispering: “—it’s all in the tires of my car, just slit them. I know I got no right to ask you boys favors, but let the kid go home, she’s just a little school kid.”

Then they told me he wanted to say something to me. I bent down close by him. I could hardly hear him, he whispered so low.

“—always wanted to have a little girl of my own like you—”

Then his face sort of turned empty. I looked at them, not understanding, and one of them said quietly, “He’s gone, Cinderella.”

I started to cry. I’d only known him a little while, but I’d liked him a lot and it felt like I’d known him a long time.

They didn’t let me go straight home, though, even after Brennan had asked them to. First, they took me downtown with them some place, and I had to answer a lot of questions.

Even then they weren’t sure whether they ought to let me go home or not, until one of them, who seemed to be the boss of all the others, happened to hear me say I went to Thomas Jefferson High School.

“I got a daughter goes there too.”

“What’s her name?” I asked.

He told me, and then he wanted to know, “Know her?”

Did I? “She sits right next to me in French class!” I gasped.

“I don’t suppose your family would like it if they heard about you getting mixed up in a thing like this,” he murmured thoughtfully.

“I’ll probably never hear the end of it,” I admitted.

“Will you promise me you’ll never dress up like this again and go roaming around?” he wanted to know.

“Will I?” I exclaimed fervently.

He turned to the others around him, and I heard him say under his breath, “Let’s send the kid home and keep her name out of it. Her deposition is just as valid if presented by proxy, and we’ve got the rest of those guys to sweat it out of. I know I wouldn’t like it if it was my own kid.”

So they called a motorcycle policeman up to the front door, and I told him where I lived and climbed on behind him, and we went skittering away.

When we got out to the house, I climbed down and hobbled across the sidewalk to our front door. “What’s the matter with your foot?” the policeman wanted to know. He looked sympathetic.

“I lost one of my slippers on those tenement stairs, but I never noticed it until now.”

“If that don’t beat everything!” he said, slapping his handlebar. “Just like she did in the storybook!”

Anthony Boucher

The Numbers Man

We have often thought that every detective-story writer is, in more or less degree, a "numbers man" . . . an imaginative story by the mystery critic of "The New York Times" and of "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine."

ANNE SAID: "I'M SO GLAD YOU CAN make it for dinner on Saturday. We're having Gregor Stolz for the weekend. I think you'll enjoy him."

I said something noncommittal about how I was sure I would, and certainly wouldn't think of missing one of Anne's curries. I looked in the mirror as I hung up the phone and my face was as blank as my words. There wasn't anything I could say—there wasn't any way I could tell Anne that having Gregor Stolz for the weekend meant murder.

I didn't know it officially. There wasn't any definite evidence I could point to, and my job is supposed to be cracking murders, not preventing them—though that's any man's job.

The oddest thing was that I not only didn't know who might be killed, I had no idea who'd do the killing. I only knew that Gregor Stolz meant death.

I noticed him first on the Harkness case. You may not remember that—it didn't get much of a play

in the papers because Harkness cracked up and the psychiatrists took over and it never came to trial. Maybe you remember something about a man who was devilishly jealous of his sister and she got married secretly. Since he was old-fashioned enough to use a straight razor he was all equipped when he heard about the marriage.

Stolz came into it when we were trying to learn how Harkness had found out about the marriage. He was a friend of the family, I guess you call it. He admitted seeing Harkness earlier in the evening the night it all happened, and finally he admitted that he might have let something slip which gave the brother an idea of what was going on.

Something about him was familiar and it bothered me, but it wasn't until the Harkness case was all wrapped up that I placed him.

He'd been a witness in the Bantock business, and I'm pretty sure you'll remember that. It was splashed all over the papers.

BERKELEY BANKER RUNS

AMOK. Bantock came home plastered one night, took his World War I Service 45 and finished off his wife and his mother because they hated each other and both of them had threatened to leave and he couldn't live without either of them. He didn't either—live, I mean—not any longer than the time consumed by the trial and appeal.

And Gregor Stolz was the casual acquaintance whom Bantock had met in an Oakland bar that night. The defense had used him to emphasize how much Bantock had been drinking, to try and get a verdict of manslaughter instead of murder for him.

The name was familiar from some place else, too. I remembered it when Captain Strudd cited the Martin case as an example of how a murderer gets what's coming to him. Young Martin at the University fed arsenic to his uncle only to learn that all Uncle's money went to a foundation to prove that Queen Elizabeth wrote Shakespeare. He was furious on discovering the terms of the will, and kept saying that a friend named Gregor Stolz had assured him of his first-hand knowledge that he was Uncle's heir. Martin was so mad about being fooled that he never even tried to play innocent. The trial was a formality, and Stolz never appeared as a witness.

Gregor Stolz had come to the Bay Region about six years ago. Since

that time there had been seven murders and three suicides among the people he knew. For the most part, they didn't know each other—he seemed to have many circles of friends. He got around. So did Typhoid Mary, I guess.

At first it might look like what insurance people call a "prone." An accident prone is a guy who's always around when industrial accidents happen—he doesn't cause them, he doesn't do anything, but if he's in a plant the insurance company's going to lose money. What sailors call a Jonah—same thing. And Gregor Stolz was a murder prone, a carrier, if you like that comparison better.

But you look closer and you see that Gregor Stolz had let something slip to Harkness, he had talked to Bantock in the bar while the banker was drinking himself into a killer, he had given young Martin an odd idea of Uncle's will . . .

I was interested, to put it mildly. I did some checking on Gregor Stolz. His record was clean enough, on the surface. Born in Austria, came to America as a child, well-educated in the East, had a little money of his own and held a half-dozen insignificant jobs before he came into a good thing—a bequest almost as screwy as Uncle Martin's. He was assured a good income from a trust for life so long as he wrote pamphlets and gave lectures propagandizing for a duo-

decimal system of numerical notation, whatever that was. I did check on the death of the man who had left him his trust fund. At the age of 87, he had died peacefully in his sleep while Gregor was a thousand miles away.

My favorite bar in San Francisco is the Tosca. The drinks are good and cheap, the customers are mostly elderly Italian businessmen who are good Joes, the walls live up to the name with paintings of Puccini and scenes from the story, and the juke-box is quiet and stocks a lot of opera.

I was drinking a *caffé espresso*, a strong, bitter, steamed coffee, with brandy in it, and listening to the juke-box when I recognized the voice from the next stool talking with the barkeep.

I turned around to Gregor Stolz and said: "Hi! How's the witness?"

His face smiled politely. He said: "You remember me, Lieutenant?"

"Harkness," I said, meaningfully.

He looked mournful and said: "A dreadful thing."

I couldn't contradict him. I just added: "Bantock."

"That poor man," he said sorrowfully.

I said: "Martin."

His eyes got smaller and he looked at me carefully. I went on. I went down the list of seven murders and threw in the three suicides for good measure. When I was through, he said: "You are a good

policeman, Lieutenant. You notice things and you collect data. Will you have another drink?"

I said, "Thanks" and he ordered. Then he sighed, said: "Yes. I have encountered more than my share of human tragedy."

I said that was too bad, indeed it was, and just how did he explain it?

"I don't know, Lieutenant." His voice was soft and low. "Of course, as a mathematician and lecturer, I do have a theory . . ."

"Yes?"

The drinks came and he sipped his thoughtfully. "I think that every life has a possible murder in it. Or, rather let me express it a trifle more exactly—every domestic situation contains an inherent motive for murder. You are a married man, Lieutenant?"

"No."

He smiled and said: "How fortunate. But marriage is not the only domestic situation. Everywhere there is murder, lurking, dormant. Most of these murders never happen—at least on the physical plane, which is perhaps the kindest way. But now and then something happens to stir the sleeping dogs. As for me, you may simply say that I bear a peculiar scent which arouses dogs from sleep."

The coffee tasted more bitter than usual. I said: "How unfortunate."

"Or if you prefer a chemical metaphor—you know how two chemicals may lie side by side inac-

tive until a third is placed with them. The third takes no part in the resulting reaction, but it is essential to it."

"I've been to high school," I said. "A catalyst."

He nodded. "I assure you, Lieutenant, that I am almost afraid to meet new people. Too often have I seen this catalytic explosion. And yet my work—my writing and lecturing—makes contacts for me. I can hardly avoid it."

I finished my drink. "I'm weeping," I said. "It's just too pathetic about your fatal scent. But let me tell you something."

"Yes?" he asked warily.

"The next time I run into any reactions with you as catalyst, you're going to see how you like indefinite confinement as a material witness."

He smiled and his voice had a light lilt to it. "That is the best you can do, Lieutenant, isn't it?"

"You know what I ought to do."

"And you know there isn't a jury on earth that would pay attention. Especially since the peculiarities of legal purity would insist on the trial of one case at a time." He slid easily off the chair. "Goodbye, Lieutenant. We shall probably meet again some day."

I didn't see Gregor Stolz again until Anne's dinner party, when I saw him next to Anne helping her pour the sherry. He liked to help people.

Anne was dressed in something long and white that made her look fresh and floating, the way she had looked that night after her graduation when we decided rookie policemen shouldn't think about marriage. The men wore tuxes, which I'm not used to, but it was the least you could do to justify that enormous house and grounds up on Queen's Road.

I told Otis I was glad to see him and I meant it. He was the husband Anne deserved and I don't mean his money. He'd have done all right without that. He was a research chemist at Conch Oil and you know the kind of mind that means—sharp and precise and just a little nervous and erratic. His eyes grinned at me through the thick glasses, but there were some fine new wrinkles around them that hadn't been there last time, and I didn't think they came from grinning. He took me over and introduced me to a good-looking young Navy officer, his cousin, Lieutenant Commander Quentin Lyons.

Then Anne brought Gregor Stolz up to us—he was being helpful, carrying the tray of sherry glasses—and said: "I don't know if you've met the lieutenant? Mr. Stolz."

I said: "We've met."

"Under most distressing circumstances," Stolz added gravely.

Anne said simply, "I'm sorry" and didn't ask any questions. It showed a nice tact, but it might

have been better if she'd pried a little.

The commander took over with a story he'd evidently started on earlier, about action he had seen in the South Pacific before being transferred to shore duty. I watched Anne while he talked and she reminded me of something but I couldn't place it. Something from a play, I thought.

When we went into the dining-room, my eyes popped the way they always do when I see one of Anne's curries. I said: "Whew! What a spread! And just what," I pointed to one of the twenty-odd small dishes, "is this?"

Anne laughed. "That's a new idea. Specialty of the house. It's rendered lamb fat—you know, like pork cracklings, only lamb."

Otis put his arm around her. "She looks like this and she can cook. What did I ever do to deserve her?"

"What indeed?" said Stolz.

It was a harmless remark, you'd think. Just a natural follow-up to Otis's line—banal echo-effect. But Otis's eyes met Stolz and something shot along his glance through his spectacles. Anne looked at the commander and for a second I would say her face showed terror.

Then she said: "Take whatever suits your taste and pile your plates very full—it's unrationed lamb." And it was just another dinner party, only better cooked than usual.

For a little while I didn't pay much attention to the talk. I let my mouth glow with a blend of flavors and textures that was like good music. When I paid attention again, Gregor Stolz was talking.

"The logic of it is so absolute," he said, "that it is doomed to failure. Some things are too cleverly true ever to be accepted."

Such as, I thought, the pattern of murder prones. But I went on listening.

"Place yourself," he said, "back at the point when arithmetic was made possible—the invention of the zero. And then ask yourself why the numeral one followed by the zero should mean ten."

"But what else could it mean?" Anne asked.

Gregor sighed with humorous patience, and Otis and the commander seemed to agree with him.

"My dear lady," Gregor went on, "take any number—let us say the succession of figures one-two-three-four. Now what does that mean, not in the decimal system, but in a system of any base?"

"I guess," Anne ventured, "it just means 1 times a 1000 and 2 times a 100 and—"

Her husband interrupted her. "My dearest sweet, what Mr. Stolz obviously means is that, whatever number is the base of your system, one-two-three-four means one times the third power of that number, two times the second power, three times the first power, and four

times the zero power—which, of any number, is one.”

“Of course,” Stolz agreed. “That is all the meaning of the numerals themselves. It is simply a convention of our civilization that one-two-three-four means 1234. In the duodecimal system, it means one great gross, two gross, three twelves and four—in other words, what you would call 2056.

“And is that good?” I asked.

He laughed. “There is nothing miraculous in that special example, it is true. But the conveniences of the duodecimal system are great, so great that certain army supply depots have unofficially adopted it for such problems as figuring cubic content. And I use it myself for all my private calculations. Once one is trained to think in it, it is so much simpler.”

“Why?” I asked.

He told me why at great length. And I found myself listening intently, partly because the subject was interesting, which I hadn’t expected, and partly because I realized that Gregor Stolz was very much in earnest. He intensely believed in this duodecimal business.

Otis had his pencil out and was figuring on the tablecloth. Anne didn’t notice him—not because she was absorbed in the numbers, but because she was talking to Commander Lyons. I wasn’t happy when I saw her look at him, nor once when I saw Gregor Stolz steal a side glance at them both.

Otis looked up from his scrawls. “This is swell,” he said. “It’s a cinch once you twist your mind the right way. Bet I could work out a table of logs if I had time.”

“It’s been done,” Stolz said, “and they’re rather more helpful than—”

I looked at my watch. I said: “I’m sorry, Anne, but I’ve got to be on duty tonight, and first I’ll have to change out of this monkey-suit.”

They made all the polite noises and Otis and Anne went with me to get my coat.

When I came out of the house, Gregor Stolz was waiting for me. He didn’t have anything to say. I think he just wanted to smile at my futility.

I said: “Not here. You get that, Stolz? These are my people!”

He smiled. “‘And what’s he then that says I play the villain?’”

I spotted the quote. Berkeley cops surprise people that way. I said: “Iago? Don’t overrate yourself.”

“Overrate? When that poor fool was . . . catalyst to only four deaths?”

I said: “Three. He wasn’t *catalyst* to Emilia.”

“Such erudition, Lieutenant!”

“I like Shakespeare. He knew what makes people tick. And I’m beginning to catch your tickings, Stolz. You like numbers. You like things you can shove around and make jump through hoops. It feels good. So you try it on a living scale and that feels good, too. But not here.”

I turned around and walked off. I wished we hadn't talked about *Othello*. Now I knew what Anne had reminded me of when she was listening to the commander.

*She loved me for the dangers I
had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity
them.*

I had the jumps at the desk that night. I kept going over it in my mind. It was a situation for a catalyst. Otis was overbrained and nervous, and his wife was looking dewy-eyed at a cousin that had come home from the South Pacific with all the glamor of heroism. There was something I'd heard once about Otis's grandfather . . .

I gnawed at myself so long over it that I almost wasn't surprised when the call came. The voice on the phone was incoherent. I didn't even know who was talking, or who was dead.

The surprise came after I got out there.

But now I was standing in Otis's study. The body was lying in the center of the room. There was a purple bruise on the jaw, and the face looked hurt and surprised. There was plenty of blood, and when will people learn not to leave sharp paper cutters on their desks? There was something by the corpse's hand, too, something that looked familiar and didn't belong there.

The doctor was saying: "Just missed the heart by the looks of things. Bled to death. Nasty, slow way of dying."

I said: "Good." The doctor gave me a funny look, but that was all right. I meant it. It was good that Gregor Stolz had had a slow nasty death.

It's hell to grill people you know, and the questioning didn't bring out very much.

The party had broken up after I left and for a while Otis had continued to talk numbers to Gregor Stolz here in the study—I didn't ask what Anne and the commander were doing at the time. Then Otis had gone down to the basement to look up some science fiction mags he had stored away that contained some stories about extraterrestrial non-decimal notation (it says in the transcript). Both Anne and the commander had been in the study (separately) to talk to Gregor but they had both left him alive (they said).

It was a family front and nobody was saying anything.

I picked up what was by the corpse's hand. "This is my notebook," I said.

Otis explained: "I found it by your place after dinner. Brought it in here, meaning to ring you up and forgot it."

"Stolz knew it was mine?"

"I think we talked about it."

Otis had found him when he

came up from the basement. There weren't any science fiction mags in the room.

I talked to Anne last. When we finished her transcript, I asked Macready to go get her a drink. Alone, we sat looking at each other.

She said: "It isn't possible."

I said: "It happened."

"But he must have . . . done it himself?"

"The doc says no."

When she spoke again, she said a funny thing. She said: "And now of all times . . ."

I looked at her. She caught herself and shook her head. "No. Not even you."

"I'm not me," I said. "I wear a badge."

"That isn't why. It's *you* I can't tell. Not the badge. Some time soon. Oh, soon. I want to, but it isn't fair . . ."

She didn't say anything more for a while. When Macready brought the drink I spilled a little on the shoulder of my suit. Willful destruction of evidence, they call it.

When she was gone Macready said: "And your own notebook is Exhibit A, huh, Loot?"

I looked at the notebook. There was blood on its pages—inside pages where it couldn't have dripped. And the blood made signs, intelligible marks—the way a finger might make, before it ran out of blood.

I said: "He knew this was my book. He left a message for me."

Macready said: "Jeez, Loot. What's it say?"

I worked on the marks. I said: "It's a big help. It says *Over Seven-Down Ten*. And under that it says *Fifteen-Ten*."

Macready looked blank and then he snapped his fingers. "I got it, Loot. It's a crossword clue like in a story I read once. Over and down, see? You find the crossword and those words are gonna be the murderer's name."

I said: "You keep an eye on things here. I'll be back in a half hour or so."

Gregor Stolz had a small house up in Strawberry Canyon east of the campus and south of the hills. It was modern, I guess. Anyway, it had a lot of flat planes and seemed to grow right out of where it was, and I liked it.

I had the dead man's keys. I tried the study first with no luck, and then the bedroom. The bed was narrow even for a single and maybe that explained a little more about the way Gregor Stolz ticked before somebody stuck a papercutter in the works.

The bedroom had paneled walls. The part above the head of the bed was all fancy, with an inlaid diamond motif running around it.

I said: "Over Seven-Down Ten." I knelt on the bed and pressed my right hand on the seventh diamond in the top row and my left in the tenth at the side. Nothing happened.

I felt around a little. My left hand moved down two diamonds.

The panel that opened was plumb in the middle of the wall, but I hadn't spotted so much as a crack. I looked in and I didn't see any rare East Indian snakes. I reached in and took out a leather-bound book. It was lying all by itself in front, but toward the back I could see a row like it.

I opened it and read a while. Then I reached in and read a little of one of the back volumes, just enough to be sure.

A man in my business ought to have a stronger stomach.

When I got back to the Queen's Road house Macready said: "All quiet. They're all three in the music room."

I heard voices and I went in without knocking. Anne was whiter than her dress and her mouth was open, not making a sound. Commander Quentin Lyons had his fists up defensive-like. Otis Jordan had his right in the air and he was staring at it as though he'd never seen it before and never wanted to see it again.

You'd think they had been living statues. I said: "O.K. Otis, I think it's time we had another talk."

He looked dazed, said: "Not . . . in there?"

I said: "Yeah. The study. Come on."

We left Anne with the commander. When Otis was seated in the study, trying to keep his eyes away

from the stains, I said: "You socked him."

"I was going to. I was going to and then—"

"Not your cousin. Gregor Stolz. That bruise on his chin."

Otis's head nodded a weak yes.

I said: "Maybe you were honest before. Maybe you didn't remember. That'd be why you were so horrified when you started to slug the commander and all of a sudden remembered the other time."

Otis nodded again. Then he started to talk. He wasn't being articulate now. "He said things. Not Quentin—Gregor. Terrible things. That Anne . . . I couldn't stand it. Then the next thing I knew I was down in Grandpa's library. I didn't know why I was there. That's where I keep the science fiction, so I thought maybe. . . . But I was worried because I didn't remember and I came back upstairs and . . ."

"Found him."

"And I still don't know. Just now when Quentin . . . I remember the hitting but nothing more. How much more have I got to remember?"

It isn't a good thing to see an industrial chemist with tears in his eyes.

I said: "Anne and the commander both saw him alive afterwards."

He waved them aside. "They're my family."

I said: "You were in a mental jam, so you went to Grandpa's library. Grandpa was a little. . . ."

Well, wasn't he? I seem to remember—"

He twisted a smile. "Grandpa was nuts, if you want the truth. That's what really makes me feel so. . . . He was a great scholar, you know—the money came from his brother. He spent all his life working on Elizabethan manuscript material. There's damned little of it and he spent a fortune and all his energy amassing stuff—this was before photostats. He was all ready to publish his book. It would have proved new things about collaborative methods in the Elizabethan drama. And then came the great Berkeley fire. That was just twenty years ago. It all went. Every scrap of it. Only he didn't think so. When that was Grandpa's library it had empty shelves. He used to take visitors around it and show them all his treasures and give them autographed copies of the book that was never published."

I said: "Hell!"

"You see we crack under strain, we Jordans, I've been overworking. I've felt like hell. And the things Gregor said. . . . They were poison, you know. I wouldn't say them even to you. I didn't believe them and still they made me take a sock at Quent just because he paid Anne a compliment."

I stood up. I said: "Come on back to the music room. I want to read you something. A little message from Gregor."

I tried not to look at Anne while I talked.

I said: "Gregor Stolz knew he was dying. He also knew that this was my notebook. He scrawled something in it for me. He didn't dare write his killer's name because if the killer saw it first he'd destroy it. Instead he left scrawls that looked meaningless. If the killer saw them he might worry, but he'd be a little hesitant about destroying the book I'd remember I left. It was up to me to figure them out.

"The 'crossword' directions sounded like the clue to a hiding place. I found a paneled wall at Gregor's and it was what I wanted. The other message—*Fifteen-Ten*—well, you'll see about that in a minute."

I opened the book in my lap and looked at it, gagging. I said. "It's hard to say in words of one syllable what Gregor was. I bet the psychiatrists have a name for it, but I wouldn't know it. I'd call it a remote-control murderer. Wherever Gregor was, murders happened. And it was always because he'd just happened to say the wrong word at the wrong time. This book from inside the panel, this is his—hell, his case-book. One of 'em. They're all written down here. Only he doesn't use names—he uses numbers.

"I think he told himself this was for secrecy in case the wrong eyes ever read it. But I think down underneath it was because that's all that names and the people ever were

to him, numbers he could twist around the way he made three-four, one-two into two-o-five-six. The numbers are too easy to read for secrecy. For instance the last entry is: *Dinner tonight with One. One's curries are delicious, but I feel that I might add a few surprising ingredients.*

"And in an earlier book his references to the banker, Charles Bank-tock, are Three-Two. Just numerals for initials, you see—one for A equals Anne, Three-Two for C. B.

"Now I want to read you a little about his latest game," I said haltingly.

They kept looking at me and I didn't dare stop. I read:

"Fifteen-Ten will prove an unusually fascinating specimen. The situation is ideal. I was pleased enough with it simply in view of his emotional problems with the fair One, but imagine my entranced delight upon discovering yet another factor of even more pleasing complication.

"Fifteen-Ten is mad. He does not realize it, of course. It is doubtless hereditary, aggravated by occupational strain. I have picked up certain stories of his actions under stress which leave me no doubt, and I am sure his employers will soon take action. If they do not, a hint may interest them. . . . To play upon this madness, to utilize it to further the emotional tension, perhaps even to reveal it to One, thereby heightening her—"

I broke off. I couldn't take any more of the reading Gregor Stolz kept by his lonely bed.

I shut the book and said: "He talked to Fifteen-Ten. He wanted to convince him, you see, that he was mad, in order to drive him to murder over—over One. He convinced him, all right."

Otis Jordan stood up. Macready made a move but I shushed him. Otis blinked through his lenses and said: "I guess madmen can still count. O's the fifteenth letter. J's the tenth. I'm ready whenever you are." Anne moved swiftly toward him. Her dress was white against him and her arms were white around his darker neck.

"It's not that easy," she said. "I don't care what Gregor Stolz wrote in his wicked little book. Otis isn't talking to you without a lawyer. And a psychiatrist if you wish."

Commander Quentin Lyons came close to the two of them. Gently, he tried to detach her arms. "Don't be foolish, Anne. Can't you see it's better this way? If you fight it, there'll only be a scandal."

Anne turned on him. Her eyes lightened. "Otis isn't crazy. Even if he is, he didn't kill anybody, and if he did, I'm not walking out on him. Do you mean you'd stand there and let this poor tired sick man talk himself into a murder confession? Why, you—"

I got up, too. This was all I was waiting for. I said: "Come along, Commander. Let Otis get his sleep.

He needs it. And that isn't a bad idea about a psychiatrist, Anne."

Quentin Lyons said: "You mean you're not taking him?"

"Why should I when I've got you?"

The surprise held him breathless for a minute and I punched the words in hard. "Remember how Gregor said he was so sold on the duodecimal system he used it even in his private figuring? When I opened his panel, I had to reach down two diamonds from ten to twelve. One-five-one-o doesn't mean fifteen ten. It means—"

A spark came into Otis's dull eyes. "One-five equals one times twelve plus five. One-o equals one times twelve plus zero."

"Thanks, Otis, I figured that, but it took me time. In Gregor's duodecimal fifteen-ten means what in decimal is seventeen-twelve. In letters, Q. L. or Quentin—"

He was on his way to the door

but somehow Macready was already there.

"He was probably beginning to crack when they transferred him to shore duty. And the field psychiatrist, not knowing about the family background—funny you don't always think of cousins having the same grandfather—didn't see it in the same light as Gregor did.

"Lots of flaws show up under the strain of war. With proper care and good sense, most of them can be fixed. But he had the bad luck to run into Gregor, who needed to push people around. . . ."

I stopped and looked at Otis. He was asleep. "I know a guy out at Conch Oil," I said. "I think I can arrange a sick leave for him."

Anne said: "You're sweet."

She moved on the couch so that Otis's sleeping head was on her white shoulder. I left them like that.



Michael Arlen

Fool-Proof

That celebrated "explorer in Mayfair," Michael Arlen, author of the immensely successful THE GREEN HAT and THESE CHARMING PEOPLE (ah, those dear dead days!), gives us what is commonly called "the straight detective story"—yes, as straight as a cork-screw! And charming?—well, sardonically so . . .

MISS LIVERMORE WAS VERY SOON comfortably settled at the small hotel in Cannes to which she had been recommended by friends in England.

The guests at the *Hôtel des Fleurs* were for the most part elderly English and American couples, who returned year by year. The establishment was conducted on very reasonable family lines, so to stay there was no strain on the purses of gentlefolk of modest means. A pleasant garden and a superb view over the bay of Cannes added to its amenities.

Her physician had ordered Miss Livermore to the South of France for a prolonged rest. Recently her nerves and normally sound constitution had been profoundly affected by a tragic event. This was nothing less than the accidental death of a little girl of ten, who was in her charge at that time.

Miss Livermore was a governess. The household of Lord and Lady Childhood had been awakened by

a piercing cry in the middle of the night to find the fair-haired, slender child lying with a broken neck at the foot of the great stone stairway leading to the hall. Hitherto no one had suspected Doris of walking in her sleep, but there could be no question that sleep-walking had caused the tragedy.

Ada Livermore, who was notably devoted to her pretty and talented charge, was unable to rid herself of a sense of guilt. She repeatedly told the afflicted parents that the child's movements in the very next room should have awakened her, and that she would never forgive herself her negligence.

There was nothing Lord and Lady Childhood could do to comfort the conscientious governess. Indeed, Miss Livermore's almost hysterical grief had the effect of accentuating their own sense of loss, so that it was with relief that they saw the governess leave their employment for her rest-cure on the Riviera.

Ada Livermore was a presentable young woman of thirty-three. She was a blonde, but in the sense in which that word is understood on the playing-fields of Girton rather than in Hollywood. She was tall and athletic, what is called a "very English type." She made friends easily, and exchanged letters generously with those whom she did not frequently see.

It is curious to note here that, but for Miss Livermore's habit of copious letter-writing about her fellow guests at the *Hôtel des Fleurs*, the recent sensational trial at the Old Bailey might not have taken place.

Miss Livermore had not been a guest at the hotel for more than a week before it was obvious that an elderly gentleman called Mr. Wilding was finding a great deal of pleasure in her companionship.

This Mr. Wilding was also a newcomer to the *Hôtel des Fleurs*, having arrived there for his first visit a few days after Miss Livermore. He was a widower with a daughter of fourteen or so, an attractive but excessively noisy girl who was something of a trial in the hotel.

Mr. Wilding was a lean, gray-haired gentleman with something of the quiet distinction of a diplomat. It was said that he was the retired senior partner of a respectable firm of provincial lawyers.

Thus it was not surprising that his courtship of Miss Livermore—

since any lower pursuit was unthinkable in connection with such respectable people—was followed with profound interest by the other guests at the *Hôtel des Fleurs*.

The extraordinary series of events which had the result of giving the unfortunate *Hôtel des Fleurs* a gruesome and world-wide notoriety was set in train by a letter written by Ada Livermore to her brother.

Young John Livermore was connected with the police, but only in the most obscure and humdrum fashion as a clerk in the Accounts Department at Scotland Yard. Thus he knew no more about the detection of crime or the pursuit of criminals than a bank-clerk with an appetite for Edgar Wallace might know, and his life was just as unexciting.

His sister's letter from the South of France, after the usual amiable gossip which is of no interest to us, went on to say that she had met a most agreeable gentleman called Mr. Wilding.

"What has drawn us together" (wrote Ada) "is that he, like me, has recently suffered a tragic loss. And the similarity is the more acute because, no matter what kind friends may say, we both cannot help blaming ourselves for the accidents which have deprived us of those who are dear to us.

"Poor Mr. Wilding's wife lost her life about a year ago in a fire which

completely gutted his country house near Market Harborough. Mr. Wilding was in the house at the very time, sitting up late over some business papers in his library downstairs. But the fire started in the east wing of the house, whereas he was sitting absorbed on the far side of the west wing.

"He had just started from his chair, smelling what seemed to be something burning, when his manservant, still in night attire, ran in with the frightful news that fire was demolishing the east wing of the house and that Mrs. Wilding was trapped in her room.

"They were quite unable to reach her through the flames, and the rest of the household only just managed to leave the house in time. One cannot help feeling the utmost sympathy for Mr. Wilding, though it is no doubt true that he—like most other people, and myself in particular—tends to exaggerate his sense of guilt, for he continues to blame himself bitterly for having been too absorbed in his business papers to become aware in time of the progress of the fire. . . ."

And so on.

Now it happened that John Livermore, in the course of conversation with a friend who knew his sister, spoke of this fire, giving the details as a matter of interest. In due course this friend in his turn happened to mention it to some relative living in Market Harborough, no doubt asking them if

they had known the unfortunate Mrs. Wilding, and so on.

To his astonishment he was told that no such accident had happened to a country house within forty miles of Market Harborough for at least ten years: that quite decidedly there had been no such considerable fire at any house within the last year or so: and that there was no Mr. and Mrs. Wilding among the landed gentry thereabouts.

This was such a facer that the friend, with a good deal of amusement, passed on to John Livermore what he had heard, adding that "dear old Ada," in spite of having been a governess, would shortly be needing a governess herself to save her from being victimized by unscrupulous though possibly handsome widowers.

John Livermore found himself in a dilemma, and a very natural one in the circumstances. For Ada was by more than ten years his elder sister, and—easy-going though she usually was—had always exercised a certain authority over him. So he was reluctant to write and tell her that her friend "Mr. Wilding" was nothing better than a liar, and a mean, sneaky liar too, with his stories of "property" near Market Harborough and "poor dead wife," and so on.

On the other hand, poor John felt it must be his duty to give her some form of warning. For suppose this plausible fellow was one

of those confidence tricksters, or—worse still—suppose he was one of those notorious adventurers who marry a series of unworldly women, steal their modest savings, and desert them.

Confronted by this dilemma, young Livermore took the bold step of asking advice from the least formidable—in appearance, that is—of the detectives of the Criminal Investigation Department. He had to loiter a few days up and down the passages of the C.I.D.—for he worked in the same building—before being able to catch sight of Chief-Inspector Parbold sitting alone in his room.

Mr. Parbold was a kindly man, frequently remembering his own timidity when climbing the first rungs of the ladder. So he did not dismiss the story of the so-called Mr. Wilding as a fanciful trifle, but listened with attention.

"Now, my lad," he said at last, "it's odds on that there is nothing in this at all. It's highly probable, of course, that this Mr. Wilding likes to exercise his imagination—but there is nothing criminal in telling a few fibs, and smart places like Cannes and Deauville and so on occasionally have pretty queer people among their visitors.

"At the same time, he *may* be up to something, and so it might be as well to keep a sort of eye on him. So I suggest, young Livermore, that in your next letter to your sister you say nothing at all about your

discovery—just write the kind of letter you usually do. But ask her to send you some snapshots. There is just a possibility that there may be one of this Mr. Wilding among them—but if not, we can try something else."

"Nothing could be easier," said John with relief, "for Ada is always sending snapshots from here and there, but she hasn't as yet sent any from Cannes."

Thus it was with a good deal of excitement that he awaited and opened Ada's reply to his letter. There were six small snapshots in all, and she explained that some had been taken while on the beach and others when a party from the hotel had gone for a drive to the lovely little hill-town of St. Paul.

In two of the snapshots Ada herself figured alone, and very nice and attractive she looked in her bathing suit. The others were of groups of four and five, and in two of these groups there was a bare-headed, lean, grey-haired gentleman with a long-legged young girl beside him.

Chief-Inspector Parbold, when John showed him the snapshots, spent quite ten minutes examining them through a powerful glass, concentrating particularly on those in which Mr. and Miss Wilding figured. Then, with a thoughtful look, he handed all but one back to the young man.

"Well, my lad, I can't *quite* tell you to put your mind at rest."

"You mean," cried John with excitement, "that you recognize him, sir?"

Chief-Inspector Parbold looked preoccupied. "Well, not quite—that's the trouble. The chap's face is familiar—or seems to be. I shall ask you to let me keep this snapshot of him and his daughter if I may."

He interrupted himself to smile at the look of fearful excitement on the young man's face. "Now don't," he continued, "run away with any fanciful ideas about this Wilding having any criminal designs on your sister—who, by the way, looks a very attractive and charming young woman. I can't quite understand your being concerned for her. She's lucky to afford holidaying about in places like Cannes."

"Oh, but she can't!" John cried quickly, and as the Chief-Inspector did not appear to be pressed for time, he told him something about Ada and how it was that she happened to be in Cannes for a protracted rest.

"But what shall I do?" he added excitedly. "Surely Ada should be warned, or something. What do you advise, sir?"

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said the Chief-Inspector. "I am due for my holiday in a few days' time, and as you say this hotel in Cannes is so cheap—well, I'll just take my couple of weeks or so down there. Now don't you worry your head

with gory detective stories, young man. If this Wilding chap is up to any tricks, I'll soon send him to the rightabout. But mind you don't write your sister anything at all about this—for one thing you will only scare her, maybe quite unnecessarily, and for another—well, he might get wind of my coming and clear out."

Now what, as appeared later at the Old Bailey, had decided Chief-Inspector Parbold to visit the *Hôtel des Fleurs* on his holiday was a fact about which he had given young Livermore no hint. This was that the face of the so-called "Mr. Wilding" was in no way familiar to him—but that, by a curious trick of memory, he had recognized in "Miss Wilding" a young provincial actress who had recently made something of a hit in a "school-girl" part, though in an unsuccessful play.

What could she be doing as this "Mr. Wilding's" partner?

What could be the nature of the "plot"—against Miss Livermore or any stranger—in which so young a girl could have her part to play?

In the meanwhile Miss Livermore was finding her stay in Cannes agreeable beyond her expectations. There was always pleasant, gossipy company to be found within the *Hôtel des Fleurs*, while for walks and drives down to the beach there was the quiet companionship of Mr. Wilding. He had hired a small Ford car, which

Ada, who enjoyed driving, drove more frequently than he.

Ada could not but admit to herself that her feelings toward the elderly but distinguished-looking widower were daily increasing in warmth. Nor could she honestly deny that his thoughtful attentiveness towards her must be inspired by a feeling of deep sympathy.

Then one day Mr. Wilding told her that which, while depriving her of her scarcely formed hopes of marrying him, redoubled her affection and admiration for him. It appeared that his daughter Ellen was really his step-daughter, being his wife's child by a previous marriage to a very rich man who had been killed in a hunting accident.

Mrs. Wilding's tragic death had, therefore, placed a very grave responsibility on the girl's stepfather. For by the late Mrs. Wilding's will the fortune bequeathed to her by her first husband, which even after the payment of onerous duties amounted to half a million pounds, came in its entirety to her only child.

Mr. Wilding's responsibility was that he had been appointed the trustee of this fortune until the girl's twenty-first birthday, after which he would be expected to exercise no more than a reasonable supervision. He confessed to Ada that, though no more than a year had passed since his wife's death, his trusteeship had already caused him the gravest concern.

For Ellen, despite her robust looks, was not really strong, easily given to contracting severe colds, chills and so on. No more than three months ago she had run a temperature of over a hundred and three during a severe attack of influenza. And since the girl's fortune, should anything happen to her, must come to him by the terms of his wife's will, Mr. Wilding confessed to Ada that while the poor girl lay so seriously ill, he found himself praying on his knees that his thoughts should not be soiled by any expectation of benefit.

Ada's sympathies, as she wrote to her brother—who immediately forwarded the letter to Chief-Inspector Parbold at Cannes—were warmly aroused by his lack of resentment towards the terms of his late wife's will. It appeared that Mr. Wilding himself, though at one time of substantial means, was now quite a poor man owing to unfortunate investments. Thus the small sum he was paid as his stepchild's trustee was far from negligible to him. But in spite of the fact that he would be deprived of both this and his trusteeship if he remarried before Ellen's twenty-first birthday, his late wife's selfishness could draw from him only the comment that she had been the victim of an unusually possessive nature.

At this Ada—who, as her brother well knew, could at times be unusually outspoken—told him quite

frankly that the opinion of all fair and reasonable people must be that the late Mrs. Wilding had behaved not at all well towards him. It was not so much the unfair disposition of her fortune, she pointed out, which must inspire this opinion; but the apparent lack of confidence in one for whom she should have had the utmost respect.

Now Chief-Inspector Parbold was kept in touch with these developments both through John Livermore's letters from London and by his own observations on the spot. Staying at the *Hôtel des Fleurs* under the amiable pseudonym of "Mr. Maple," he had lost no time in making the acquaintance of the other guests, among whom, of course, were Miss Livermore and the two so-called Wildings.

His suspicions about "Miss Wilding" were immediately confirmed by the fact that she went out of her way, by excessive noisiness and romps, to emphasize her age as about fourteen. The detective judged that she must be at least seventeen, and a very talented young actress at that.

The Chief-Inspector's interest in the "Wilding" conspiracy was increased by young John Livermore's letters from London. The matter of these letters made it plain that there *was* a conspiracy on foot. The story of "Wilding's" trusteeship the wealthy stepchild, the selfish will, the stepfather's inability to marry

without losing money—this string of lies had all the marks of a plot very carefully evolved. But to what end, for what purpose?

It seemed unreasonable to suppose that so elegant a trickster should have gone to such trouble merely to marry an attractive ex-governess for her savings—even though these amounted, so John had told him, to a quite respectable sum. On the other hand, if his aim *was* marriage and subsequent robbery, why should he tell that string of lies about being *unable* to marry without losing money by it?

In the meanwhile the Chief-Inspector, or rather "Mr. Maple," found himself both liking and being sorry for Ada. She was so obviously impressed by the distinguished-looking "widower." She was so plainly flattered—though she did her best not to show this—by his respectful attentions. In fact, she had fallen for the blighter, as Parbold expressed it to himself, like a ton of bricks.

So it was no wonder that after he had been there a week his indignation at the hoax that was being played on Miss Livermore had increased to a pitch at which he could scarcely wait to give "Mr. and Miss Wilding" a real good piece of his mind for so deceiving a young lady who really fancied herself "in love."

His resentment was a little appeased by a conversation he had in secret with Inspector Gaillard, of the Cannes Préfecture of Police, to

whom he had introduced himself in his real capacity. Inspector Gaillard offered to summon Wilding to the Préfecture to show his passport, to find out whether it was a forged one or not, and if it was, to have him immediately expelled.

Parbold told him he would prefer to await further developments, adding that he would be grateful if Inspector Gaillard and his men would hold themselves in readiness to act on any information which he, Parbold, might gather.

However, the conspiracy was moving towards its climax much more quickly than Chief-Inspector Parbold suspected. And it was actually he who, unwittingly, brought this climax about.

John Livermore wrote him again from London, enclosing a letter he had just received from his sister. Ada had written to her brother, obviously in very great distress of mind, that Mr. Wilding had done her the very great honor of asking her to be his wife.

He had told Ada that he would gladly sacrifice his present income and onerous trusteeship, and that he could with very little difficulty secure adequate employment in London, if he could rely on her companionship as his wife. Ada wrote distressfully that she had brought herself to refuse him, though in all her life she had never met a man she liked and respected so deeply. But it would be cruel to expect a man of his age to start

working again for what could be no more than a bare living, and so she could not permit him to sacrifice himself.

Parbold pondered long over this letter. At last he had something definite to work on—a proposal of marriage. This “Wilding” was undoubtedly an unusually clever crook. The detective could see how a woman like Miss Livermore would in the end give way to a proposal of marriage couched in such unselfish terms. She would refuse him a few times, and then marry him. Then he, once married on the unselfish basis of having sacrificed his own income, would find it as easy as pie to persuade Ada to entrust him with her savings, which John Livermore had estimated at about five or six hundred pounds.

Chief-Inspector Parbold now clearly saw the reason for the complicated plot of the stepchild, the unfair will, and so on. It was almost fool-proof where such a fair-minded, unworldly woman as Ada Livermore was concerned. The detective estimated that “Mr. and Miss Wilding’s” expenditure at the modest *Hôtel des Fleurs* could amount to no more than a fraction of the five or six hundred pounds they stood to win. Thus the precious pair would be clear gainers by about four hundred pounds for six weeks’ not very hard work.

He decided to act immediately. There was no question of arrest, of course. Nothing criminal had yet

been done. But he fancied that a word or two privately with the "Wildings" would suffice to get them out of Cannes as quickly as the fastest airplane would take them.

It was this very "word or two" which led to such astonishing developments.

The Chief-Inspector saw the man that very morning sauntering in the garden with Ada. Drawing him away with a brief excuse, he wasted no time in beating about the bush.

"Mr. Wilding—or whatever your name is—let me give you a word of warning. It would be healthy for you and for your so-called stepdaughter to leave Cannes today. Let me make myself quite clear—I am not asking you—I am *telling* you."

These words did not make quite that impression on the man that Parbold had hoped for. Wilding smiled faintly.

"I recognized you, Chief-Inspector, the moment I set eyes on you. May I ask if you are actually making any charge against me and my so-called stepdaughter? If so, I should like to hear it."

"That tone will get you nowhere, Wilding. No, there is no charge *here*. Though I dare say I could make some charges against you if you ever come my way in England—bigamy and desertion, for example. I happen to know you are trying to marry Miss Livermore un-

der false pretences. So I am merely warning you to get out for the good of your health—and to stay out."

Wilding threw a thoughtful glance across the garden at Miss Livermore's tall, athletic figure. Ada looked very fair and English as she stood talking in her pedantic "governess" French to an elderly French couple. Parbold could almost feel the man regretting having to give up both such a pleasant "wife" and such a tidy little sum of money. He was a cool customer, all right.

"Make up your mind," he said sharply.

"I have," Wilding assured him with the utmost calmness. "In fact, I had some days ago made up my mind to leave Cannes—temporarily, of course. Miss Livermore will verify this if you care to ask her. I shall leave for Marseilles this afternoon—"

Astounded, Parbold said, "You mean you were going anyway?"

Wilding smiled ruefully. "I was intending to leave only temporarily, Chief-Inspector, for I really have some important business in Marseilles—but if you had not put your oar in I should have been back here in a couple of days. As things stand, however, I shan't come back, and Ellen—who had really grown quite attached to the young lady—can join me in a few days' time. This will make everything seem less abrupt to Miss Livermore, and

I fancy hurt her feelings less—as you seem to be so sensitive about them.”

At this moment Ada herself came towards them, saying, “And what are you two men conspiring about on so lovely a morning?”

The Chief-Inspector could not but admire Wilding as a cool customer as he answered pleasantly, “I was just telling Mr. Maple that you, Ellen and I had arranged to go for a bathing picnic tomorrow to that pleasant little bay near La Napoule. But I am afraid you and Ellen must go by yourselves, my dear Ada, for —”

Ada looked quite vexed. “I think it’s too bad your going away just now, even for a few days. And just when we had arranged that nice little trip tomorrow—and I was so looking forward to teaching both you and Ellen how to do the ‘crawl’ stroke!”

“Oh, there’ll be time enough for that later, Ada—and I dare say when I get back from Marseilles I shall find Ellen as accomplished a swimmer as you.” Wilding then pleasantly included the Chief-Inspector in the conversation by adding, “This little bay they are going to, so Miss Livermore tells me, is a most charming, secluded little place with a really nice beach for poor swimmers, as the shallow water extends for hundreds of yards. You should make a point of visiting it before you leave Cannes, Mr. Maple.”

Later on Chief-Inspector Parbold was to kick himself for not having “spotted” the point of the conspiracy then and there. But at the time he felt he had done quite a good job in having warned an unscrupulous adventurer off the field, for when he saw “Mr. Wilding” leave the hotel that afternoon with his bags, he was reasonably certain that Miss Livermore would never see her handsome “widower” again and that his “dear little Ellen” would shortly follow him—no doubt to victimize gullible women in places far from Cannes. He only hoped he might have a chance some time to lay hands on the pair at their tricks in England.

But the next morning did not find him in such an easy frame of mind. It seemed to him that he had managed to get rid of a really clever crook altogether too easily. Besides, wasn’t there something suspicious about the girl being left behind as a “companion” for Miss Livermore? Companion my eye!

Then as he sat brooding over his rolls and coffee it suddenly came to him as a real shock that he had no guarantee whatsoever that Wilding had left Cannes at all. He might merely have moved to another hotel. And then this all-day picnic . . .

What a juggins he had been! What could be simpler than for Wilding to pick up Ada and Ellen at the little bay up the coast, motor to some small town; maybe even

as far as Toulon or Marseilles, and get married before a British Consul? Trust a cool customer like Wilding to have all papers, both his and hers, in order.

It was galling to the Chief-Inspector's vanity that these thoughts should have come to him too late, for it was now past eleven o'clock. The hall-porter told him that Miss Livermore and Miss Wilding had left a full hour ago in the Ford, complete with picnic basket and bathing things.

The Chief-Inspector grimly asked him to call a taxi immediately. He would drive up the coast past La Napoule until he came upon them, and if Wilding was there he would give him the surprise of his precious life.

He was astounded when the hall-porter, before telephoning for the taxi, handed him a note addressed to "Mr. Maple," saying it had come by hand only a few minutes before. Tearing it open, he was certain it must come from Inspector Gaillard. But it was unsigned.

You are urged to hire a car and drive immediately towards Trayas up the coast. Your driver will know the way. You are advised to call first at the Préfecture and bring with you a French police official. Keep your eyes open for a Hôtel L'Aubras, which is closed and shuttered. Draw up your car one hundred yards farther on. Then take the footpath leading to the left, and

see no one spots you from the beach below. Hurry.

That was all. But the Chief-Inspector wasted no time in wondering over this mysterious document. He immediately telephoned to Inspector Gaillard to say he would pick him up as soon as possible. Then, having done so ten minutes later, he explained the "Wilding" conspiracy to the Frenchman up to date, and showed him the note.

"But can this come from Miss Livermore?" Gaillard asked, frowning.

"Impossible, I should say. No, there's someone else in this case we don't yet know of who must have been watching me as I've been watching Wilding. But we can only wonder what the devil it all means until we get to this place."

The driver of the car, directed by Inspector Gaillard, drew up to the left of the road past the deserted *Hôtel L'Aubras*. Rich red rocks form the coast line at this part. The happy contrast between this rich, satisfying color and the deep blue of the sea under the June sun would have entranced Chief-Inspector Parbold at any other time.

A tiny bay was about twenty yards below them, but the beach was entirely screened from the road on which they stood by a line of bushes. Some twenty-five yards to the right, on a jagged red rock forming one arm of the tiny bay, stood a shuttered and obviously unoccupied villa. There was no sign

of life anywhere, except a passing car or so on the road.

"By the end of July," Gaillard whispered, "this place is crowded with all nationalities, but the season has not yet begun."

Parbold led the way up the footpath mentioned in the mysterious note. Ten yards farther on they came to a small break in the bushes, and could look down on the beach immediately below them without being seen.

Kneeling, they peered down and saw Miss Livermore and Ellen Wilding. The strip of beach was paved with smooth pebbles. The sea was shallow and very clear. The police officers could see the smooth rocks below the surface for quite a way out.

The two women below were in the water up to their knees, and Ellen's laughter was clearly audible.

"But where," Gaillard whispered, "is our friend Wilding?"

"We've just got to wait," Parbold whispered back. "And I'm just getting an idea what we're waiting for, too. My view is that Wilding is hidden somewhere behind one of those red rocks on the beach. And then —"

"On the contrary," a voice behind them said just audibly, "he is hidden up here."

The two detectives slewed round. The man Wilding was crouching a little to the right of Parbold.

But he appeared to be too busy to

enjoy the effect he had produced. He was squinting through the eyepiece of a miniature motion-picture camera.

Chief-Inspector Parbold found himself flushing with anger, in which there was a good deal of discomfort at being made to look a fool before Inspector Gaillard.

"You had better explain, and quick," he snapped.

"Shut up, and just watch," Wilding snapped back, still focusing his camera. "Now! Look, man!"

As he spoke he started turning the machine. The two detectives stared out at the figures in the sea. They were still in fairly shallow water, Miss Livermore's tall figure as she stood being submerged only to her waist and Ellen's to her shoulders. They were laughing, Ellen obviously protesting about something, as uncertain swimmers will.

Wilding, still turning his machine, gave a low chuckle.

"Miss Livermore is persuading Ellen to let her teach her how to 'crawl.'"

"Well, what's wrong with that?" snapped Parbold. "It all looks quite innocent to me. If you are making monkeys out of us, Wilding —"

"Cool off, Chief-Inspector—and if you are a good boy I'll teach you how to become a real detective one day."

Inspector Gaillard opened his mouth to rebuke such impertinence, but never got the words out.

Parbold stiffened, entirely forgetting Wilding. With all his experience of crime and criminals, he was never to forget the next few minutes.

The enchanting sunlight, the lovely, tranquil sea embroidered with the red rocks, the faint echo of Ada Livermore's insane laughter, the eerie insistent click-click of the motion-picture camera . . .

Gaillard said hoarsely: "My God—it's murder! She's drowning her!"

Chief-Inspector Parbold dashed forward into the bushes, whence he could climb down to the beach.

Wilding, still turning his machine, snapped, "Stay put, you fool. Ellen can take care of herself—she's only pretending to be a dud swimmer. Let me take this film so completely that no jury can have any doubt."

Ada Livermore's mad laughter had been succeeded by a tense, horrible silence. She was struggling with all her might to keep her grip on the ankles of the frantically struggling girl. For when Ellen had taken up the position to do the stroke she was about to learn, Miss Livermore had grasped her firmly by the ankles and raised them high, so that the girl's head had been instantly submerged. Ellen was making a fierce struggle for her life. But all the same, with her head well under water, and her legs held high in the stronger woman's grip, the end must come soon.

"Now!" shouted Wilding.

Ada Livermore was now pressing the ankles downwards, then up, then down again, obviously trying to dash the girl's head against the rocks below.

The two policemen scrambled down to the beach, shouting. Ada Livermore turned, and the girl's ankles at once slipped from her surprised grasp. The two detectives dashed into the sea up to their shins, but then thought better of it as they saw Ellen's head come up. They could distinctly see Ada Livermore's face turned towards them with the blank, expressionless look of a sleep-walker.

Then the girl she had tried so callously to drown, panting though she still was, made the horrible scene look almost normal, almost comic, by her reaction. She waded to Ada Livermore and gave her a slap on the face so hard that it resounded right through the bay. Then she took the woman by the wrist and pulled her toward the beach. Ada Livermore, as though dazed, made no resistance.

Wilding, who had now joined the detectives, said to Inspector Gaillard, "You can charge her with attempted premeditated murder. And that will have to rest as the charge if she does not confess to the murder of Doris Childhood."

The two women were now quite close, wading towards them. Ada Livermore's expression was still that of a sleep-walker, she seemed

neither to see nor hear anything. When Gaillard formally charged her, she looked at him dumbly and without understanding.

But a wave of crimson flooded her face when she heard Wilding formally introduce himself to the two police officers as Stanley Mason, private inquiry-agent employed by Lord Childhood. Her veiled blue eyes seemed to dilate and grow bright. Chief-Inspector Parbold found himself quite unable to look at her. In a low, hoarse voice, totally unrecognizable as that of the cultured governess they had known, she revealed the corruption of her soul in a stream of abuse.

Inspector Gaillard took her back to Cannes in the hired car. Parbold, unwilling to see more of the woman than necessary, went back with the inquiry-agent and his assistant in the Ford car, which Ada Livermore had parked round the bend of the bay.

The Childhoods had not been entirely satisfied by the "accident" explanation of their daughter's tragic death. Certain faint marks on her upper arms and shoulders might have been caused by physical violence immediately preceding the girl's fall down the stairs.

But they had no reason in the world to suspect Miss Livermore any more than any of the domestic staff. Through a friend they had engaged Stanley Mason, who had recently returned from Canada,

where he had for many years enjoyed a lucrative practice as a private detective.

Mason, having eliminated all the servants as possibilities, concentrated on the governess and made inquiries into her past. Before coming to the Childhoods she had been in three situations, all of which she had left in the proper course of events and with the highest references.

But Mason discovered one significant "similarity" between these three households. During Ada Livermore's employment in each one there had been cases of theft, both of trinkets and money in small amounts. Recently engaged servants had been dismissed on suspicion without proof, but in no instance had the frank and athletic governess been under any suspicion whatsoever.

Thereupon Stanley Mason, in his eagerness to expose a criminal so depraved as a child-killer, had made a long shot and formed this theory: that Ada Livermore was a money-maniac with a respectability complex—that is, she would commit any crime, even murder, if she could enrich herself without losing her standing as a respectable woman.

The Childhood crime then took shape in his mind's eye. Doris must have been awakened in the night by some noise. She had always been known as a fearless child. Not finding her governess in the next room,

the door of which was always ajar, she had no doubt gone out into the corridor and found her in the act of leaving some room in which she could have no business. The rest of the tragedy, given Ada Livermore's "respectability" obsession, followed with unnatural logic.

But, convinced though he might be that there had been cold-blooded murder, how could he obtain proof? Or even confirmation?

He had decided that the only way to do this was *to entice the "money-maniac" to attempt another murder for money*—for "big" money this time, and not for the few banknotes she might steal from a guest's room in a large and hospitable household.

Thus Mason had evolved the plot of the widower in love who would be a rich man if only his stepchild was out of the way.

He told Chief-Inspector Parbold that his suspicions of Ada Livermore were immediately confirmed by her reaction to his casually dropped remark that all "the late Mrs. Wilding's" great fortune would revert to him if anything should happen to Ellen. At the time the governess had made no comment on this, but on several occasions later she had tried to draw him out with regard to his attachment to his stepchild. He had replied noncommittally that an excessively noisy girl was not always the most agreeable companion for a man of fifty-four.

Four days ago, judging by her manner that he had provoked her greed sufficiently, he had told her that he might any day have to go to Marseilles. That very day she had borrowed his car on the excuse that she had wanted a lonely drive. He had followed her in a hired car, and seen her explore the lonely little bay near La Trayas.

Examining it himself after she had left, he had seen it must be an ideal spot for a murder which would look accidental. What could be easier than for a poor swimmer to slip and dash her head against those submerged rocks? Mason foresaw that Ada Livermore, after having convinced herself of the girl's death, would pull her out into much deeper water, and then, realistically pretending to be exhausted and battered herself, start a frantic screaming for help to attract the attention of a passing motorist along the coast.

Ellen, who had assisted him in several previous cases, was perfectly willing to take the risk. Mason, before going away on his pretended trip to Marseilles, had had an emotional half-hour with Ada Livermore in which he had told her that nothing in the world would make him happier than if he could but make a great fortune and lavish it on her as his wife. She had replied emotionally that she had finally made up her mind to marry him with or without money. And it was this which had convinced him of

her intentions with regard to the picnic on the following day.

Stanley Mason's view was that if he could but catch the woman red-handed attempting murder, and with a film as added proof, her resistance might break down and lead her to confess to the Childhood murder.

He was proved right. Ada Livermore facilitated extradition to England by confessing to the murder of Doris Childhood. Doris had found her coming out of the room of a guest, who was known to drink port excessively, sleep heavily, and always have a plentiful supply of money in his pockets. The child,

who had never liked her governess, was about to expose her then and there by her screams, and it was in the consequent struggle at the head of the staircase that Ada Livermore pushed the child down the stairs.

Ada Livermore was tried and condemned for murder at the Old Bailey in June last, in what was known for many days as the "Riviera Murder Case." No doubt it amused Stanley Mason, who liked to keep in the background, to hear that his friend, Chief-Inspector Parbold, was warmly congratulated, both by his colleagues and the Press, on the solution of so very difficult a case.



Frederick Irving Anderson

The Half-Way House

Certain writers have a quality in their work that defies time—their stories never seem to date (except, of course, in such superficial ways as “period” details of clothing, imperceptible quirks of dialogue, and the vintage of an automobile). Here, for example, is a story that was first published in “The American Magazine” of May 1922—more than 40 years ago. With only the most minor of changes, couldn’t this story have been first published last month? . . .

SHORTLY AFTER THE OLD CHIMNEY clock struck nine, Grinder, the jaunty dog combing burrs out of his stump tail by the fire, suddenly lifted his head and looked keenly at his master, Belden, the bridge builder, and his good friend, Armiston. The pair were poring over chess.

The two men, in rough homespun and with neglected beards, were wholly unconscious of the sudden alert pose of the dog. Inside, only the muffled ticking of the old clock and the faint rustling of the fire on the hearth disturbed the silence.

Grinder quietly arose, on stiff pins. Something was on the wind. Something was coming up the hill. Grinder moved stiffly to his master’s side and halted, expectant, listening. Grinder nudged his master’s wrist with his shoe-box nose, and Belden absently stroked the

great dog’s head. It was incomprehensible to Grinder that these two precious foolish humans should sit here dreaming.

Belden, who was to build a bridge in the Andes, had come up here to his abandoned ancestral hulk, to be alone to think. Oliver Armiston, extinct author, now living on the royalties of a past career in fiction crime, had invited himself, saying he would be cook and bottle-washer.

If this had been the old days, there would have been excitement enough in this house by now. The thorough-brace coach, tugging up the steep grade, would announce itself with a triumphant blast of the horn. The old tire-iron still hanging from its stout gallows in the front yard, under the battered sign of the Three Crows, would moan its rhythmic lament, summoning its ostler and maidservant. The coach

and four, bound up from Hartford for Albany, would pull up at the gate on haunches; and the ladies would flutter in and gentlemen would thump pewter mugs on the cherry bar and drink to news, from north and south, which met here. But that was long, long ago. The sign, with its three crows dilapidated, still creaked on its weathered hinges; but mine host was gone, and even the road had stopped coming up that hill—or was little more than a torrent-gashed gully now.

"Queen check," said Belden.

Grinder moved to the door and putting his muzzle to the crack, he whined. Belden rose to let the dog out. It was a nasty night; the drizzle was beginning to freeze as it fell.

Belden peered out.

"Isn't that a motor?" he said, puzzled. There was the sound as of huge wings beating the air. As he stared at a point in the dark, two ghostly headlights appeared. The car came on slowly, feeling its way. It reached his gate, passed it.

"Hello! Hello!" cried Belden, and the dog barked. But the car continued on. Belden ran to the tire-iron, and seizing the chained sledge, hanging there since the beginning of time, struck it a blow, and the moaning thing responded with eerie clamor. The car stopped, and slowly backed to the gate.

"Hello, the house!" cried a voice; "Where does this road lead?"

"Nowhere," shouted Belden. "This is the end of it. You should have followed the river. How did you climb that hill?"

"Heaven knows!" responded the voice from the car. A searchlight picked up, in its luminous spray, Belden and the dog standing under the old gallows; then, as if endowed with a curiosity of its own, the luminous spray investigated the old gallows tree, climbed it, and came to rest on the battered sign of the Three Crows.

"Oh, a road-house!" the unseen driver exclaimed. "That's better!"

"This isn't a road-house. There are no accommodations here," put in Belden.

"It isn't? You're displaying a sign, aren't you?" The voice in the dark became suddenly aggressive.

"The sign has been there for a hundred and fifty years," said Belden.

"Read Blackstone," retorted the voice. "He settled the matter of signs—just about the time you hung that one. I believe his dictum still stands as good law. In any event, I am not going down that hill till daylight."

"I will not go another step!" announced a woman behind the curtains. Belden fairly cringed. He must make the best of it. Oliver came up with the lantern.

"They take this for a road-house," chuckled Belden in his ear. "Let them dream on."

Going on ahead with the lantern,

he piloted the car down the overgrown drive to the barn. Two vague figures in furs got down.

"You'll find two bags in the rumble," said the man.

"I'll take one. You take the other," said Belden, smiling to himself.

He set down the bag in the kitchen and went out to get fresh-wood. When he returned the man was drawing off his gloves in front of the fire. The woman was caressing the jaunty Grinder, cheek to cheek. Laughing, she stood up and let her furs slip from her shoulders, revealing a modish outline. Her hair, prematurely white, sparkled with tiny facets of rain; her face, as round and smooth as a child's, showed high color that suited admirably her vivacity. She held off the playful dog long enough to take stock of the room.

"Lovely!" she cried; and she clapped her little hands ecstatically. In the flickering light from the fire and the candles, with their delicate scent of bayberries, the room and its antiquated furnishings showed mellow and inviting. In her tour she came to the cherry bar.

"Is this the register?" she asked gayly, discovering an old book chained to the bar. "Are we to sign our names?"

"So the law prescribes, madam," said Belden, opening the book at the last blank page. He took a quill pen from a drawer. She laughed, delighted, as he passed it to her.

"Who was the last one to register?" She read: "Jonathan Croyden, Gent., his lady; and two servants, one free. Thursday, fifth month, seventeenth day, eighteen fifty-four." She drew a long breath. "Eighteen fifty-four!" she repeated. "And I come next!" Then, with sparkling eyes, she wrote, in a prim hand, trying to match the chirography of the remote Jonathan Croyden, Gent.

"Business has been quiet of late years," said Belden drolly. This to the man, who was examining the page on which the lady had written. She seized him by the lapels and turned him around.

"Isn't it romantic! Our coming here—out of a night like this!" To Belden: "I wonder—how did Jonathan Croyden, Gent., come, with his lady, and his two servants, one free?"

"In the good coach, Lightning Express, madam."

"Yes! In their coach and four!" she said. "And we—in our coach, and—what is it, Angus,—forty?"

"Eighty, I believe," said the man.

She burst out, dramatically:

"'Twas a wild night. Only knaves were abroad, on the high road!" Smiles played about her lips. "The landlord was a sur-rly fellow. He would turn us away! But . . . we said—" and her dancing eyes were turned upon the man beside her—"Sirr-ah, why dost thou display a sign? Dost thou not know that Blackstone—Blackstone

—hath said that whosoe'er displays a sign obligates himself to provide food and lodging, for whomsoe'er may apply?"

"I'm afraid I did labor under a slight misapprehension," said the man mildly.

"My fathers kept open house here for a hundred years," said Belden. "I could do no less, on such a night. Have you eaten?"

"Oh, yes," replied the man comfortably. Then, for the first time, he noticed the set game of chess, and he moved over to it and sat down.

"Ah, Philidor, eh?" he said musingly. "Rather archaic, isn't it?"

"We're trying it out."

"Proceed," said the man. "I'm interested, really."

"And might I look about?" asked the lady.

"Just where are we?" demanded the man abruptly.

"Don't tell us," she interjected, placing a hand over his lips. "We don't want to know."

The three men lapsed into the silence of chess. The woman's little French heels beat a tattoo on the hard maple floor, as she moved from one object of adoration to another. The quiet became so profound that the three men started nervously when she asked:

"Might I look up-stairs?"

"But, my dear!" the man protested.

"Let me give you a candle," said Belden.

When she came down again, the

game was finished; the three men chatted idly in front of the fire with the easy fellowship and anonymity of a club car or a smoking-room.

"Is there a ghost?" the woman asked, dropping down beside Grinder.

"I believe there is—a horse."

The pair exclaimed in unison: "A horse?"

"Yes—a horse."

"But how, a horse? Ghosts are the residue of souls. A horse has no soul."

"I don't know anything about that," said Belden. "It comes to the front lawn, to graze, nights. It stamps. It has a dead man tied to its heels."

A loose shutter banged violently, and they started, then laughed.

"It's a bit of history of our family we don't usually relate," explained Belden. "This house, and these lands—so the story runs—were won in a game of cards, with the aid of a mirror, from some poor drunken devil, by one of my distinguished progenitors—two of them, in fact; it was the wife, I believe, who held the mirror."

"Didn't the victim revenge himself?" she said in an awed tone.

"Yes. He stole a horse from the stables—one of his own horses he had lost at play—Oh, he had lost everything! He tied himself fast to its heels, and blew out his brains—and the horse galloped home. . . . They heard it stamping, all night. In the morning, they found him."

"I see." She was smoothing Grinder's head. "Angus," she said, softly.

"Yes, my dear."

"This is the place."

"Oh, my dear—Please!"

"It is!" she persisted, holding up Grinder's head and gazing into the dog's eyes. "I knew it, the instant I came into the room."

"My dear, I beg of you. We have thrown ourselves on the mercy of these two gentlemen; and I am sure they have put a very good face on it." He turned to Belden as one asking indulgence for a wayward child. "Madam," he said, with somewhat ironical emphasis, "is a trifle inclined to abruptness. If she sees a thing that pleases her, there is no intermediate step between liking and possession. Evidently, she has taken a fancy to your ancestral hall, sir. I warn you."

"I have never seen another room like it," she murmured. "It has been in your family all this time?"

"Since 1789—since the lady manipulated the mirror." Belden was watching her narrowly.

"And these things?"

"They came gradually. Nothing in the last seventy years. You see, the road went away, and left our front door hanging over space."

"I'll buy it—just as it is." Her eyes were aflame.

"I must protest!" ejaculated the man, rising, and showing his irritation.

"I want nothing disturbed," she

went on, "not even the ashes on the hearth."

"And the ghost?" Belden threw in.

"Oh, I insist on the ghost!"

"Did you look in the pink room? The one over in that corner?" asked Belden, pointing at the ceiling.

"The one with the great rope bed?"

"Yes. That's something else we don't usually talk about in the family. It may chill your enthusiasm. People don't sleep there. Several have tried. They woke up dead in the morning."

"Angus! Angus!" she cried ecstatically. She jumped up and threw her arms about his neck, though in his pettish mood he tried to hold her off. "Think of it! It's all here! A ghost horse—that stamps! And a lethal chamber! And *this* room! It is all mine! I knew it, the moment I entered." She turned to Belden. "What is your price? I want it now—instantly!"

The man's face twisted into a scowl.

"This promises to be an unpleasant sequel to a rare evening," he said shortly. "I don't know your name, sir; nor yours, sir," turning to Oliver. "You haven't asked mine. I don't know where I am. Strange as it sounds, I could not tell at this moment if this is New York, Massachusetts, or Connecticut. All I know is that, after being unnecessarily rude, I am the guest of a

most gracious host." He turned to the woman. "And now you propose to take the roof from over his head," he said, with ill-concealed chagrin.

She laughed lightly.

"You don't know where you are? What better could you wish?" she said.

There was a moment of tension. Oliver glanced curiously at Belden.

"You are really willing to let her have it?" asked the man. "Forgive me . . . it seems like sacrilege."

"On the contrary, I'd be glad to be rid of it. It's too full of unholy memories. Its actual value is small. There are four hundred acres of land—abandoned. Here is the house, as you see it—abandoned, too. There is no way to get here. You came up the hill tonight, sir, with fool's luck. On a second try, you would surely break your neck. You see the appraisal is largely fantastic. These . . . things—" Belden said, indicating the relics of antiquity crowding about as if straining their ears to catch what was afoot. "For another, they might have sentimental attachment. Not for me! I never liked the place. . . . There *is* something, upstairs—in that pink room. I don't know what. But it's there! I warn you."

The woman drew a deep breath.

"Ten thousand, cash?"

"Too much—it will cost you that to build a road."

"That is satisfactory to me," said the man shortly.

"Ha!" she cried, as she fell on her knees on the hearth rug and hugged the compliant Grinder. Belden rose and went to the escritoire. He wrote, reading aloud as his pen moved:

"For one dollar paid, I grant option of sale of the land known as the Belden Half-Way House and Farm, situated in the town of—"

"Please! No!" interrupted the woman imperiously, in high-pitched tones. "We don't wish to know *where* it is situated."

"In the town, county and state, of blank," rumbled on Belden, "'—to—'" He turned. "To whom? I can't sell a place at Nowhere to Nobody."

The woman questioned the man with her eyes. There was a slight pause. Belden abruptly stepped to the register and read aloud what she had written:

"Agnes Witcherly, lady; and her Gent. Both free."

"Grant it to Agnes," she said; and Belden returned to the desk.

"To Agnes Witcherly, of the city and state of—" Another blank?" She nodded quickly. "Blank, together with the contents of the dwelling, barns, outbuildings, including the ashes on the hearth. And it is agreed, in further consideration, that the said Agnes Witcherly, pay to the Newsboys' Home of New York City the sum of Ten Thousand Dollars—as from an anonymous donor—within thirty days. Signed, Webster Belden."

"Webster Belden?" said the man, turning slightly in his chair.

"Webster Belden," repeated Belden. "Witness, Oliver, like a good fellow. You sign, too, madam. Thank you. Would you like to see it, sir?"

The man folded the paper, put it on the mantelshelf, produced a dollar bill, and handed it to Belden. There was a moment of embarrassed silence. It was astonishing how the atmosphere had changed. The man shivered; he threw some more wood on the fire. With an effort at levity he said, "I suppose I may, now. It's mine. Or, at least, hers."

The woman, singing, mounted the stairs, holding a candle high above her head. They could hear her rummaging around up there. She came down presently carrying two bags, which she let fall to the floor. She went to the hall and returned with a fur coat.

"Is this your coat, sir?" she asked sweetly of Belden.

"Yes, madam."

"And might I help you on with it?"

"My dear! My dear! This is carrying things with too high a hand!" broke in the man.

"You understand, don't you?" She turned to Belden.

"Perfectly," he replied, taking the coat from her. She went again to the rack, and this time brought back Oliver's coat.

"I don't know where your caps

are. I packed your bags—just the things in your rooms. That was all, wasn't it?"

"But—you can't turn them out, like this!"

"It's my house! I own it!" she replied.

She opened the door. "The moon has come out again. It's freezing. I think you will find the walking good, sir. Thank you." An icy blast swept in, tossing the ashes into fantastic eddies. Grinder stood waiting, eager. The two men stepped across the threshold.

"A boy from the village will be up early in the morning to clean out the furnace and build a fire," said Belden.

As the door closed on them softly, Belden, turning up his collar, remarked to Oliver: "What an astonishingly coldblooded woman!"

It was four days later.

"Hello! I thought you were off for Antofogasta," exclaimed Armiston, as the bridge builder entered his study. "No; I'm not busy," said Oliver, quickly, as Belden looked inquiringly at Armiston's visitor. The visitor shifted uneasily. It was Parr, deputy of police. Belden drew up a chair. "What's the trouble?" asked Oliver.

"Money," growled Belden. With a childlike smile he added, "Could you let me have a couple of millions?"

"As bad as that?"

"Worse. Did you notice the market this morning?"

"My dear fellow!" said Oliver in gentle reproof. "I invest. I don't gamble. I only notice the market afternoons."

"It sagged again," said Belden glumly. "Hit a whale, or something. Nobody seems to know just what. Probably somebody's got a toothache. I'm building a bridge, a railroad, a power plant. I need money. 'They' said, 'Wait—market's soft.' I can't wait. I told them so. 'They,' " muttered the engineer, referring to some remote hierarchy of money, "'They' said, 'Go down and see Winchester.'" Armiston and Parr pricked up their ears. They exchanged a glance.

"Winchester is 'Light-and-Power,'" explained Belden. "You may not know it, but every time you turn on a light, you do it by royal warrant from a man named Winchester."

"Did you see him?" demanded Parr.

"I went there, like a fool," said Belden. "Nobody home."

"What did they tell you?"

"Oh, he's having a conference in Kalamazoo—or Kamchatka. You know what satisfaction you can get out of a frozen-faced clerk. The Chileans have got a time-limit on me. I've got to have money! I've got to find Winchester."

"So have I," remarked the deputy of police blandly.

"Eh?" ejaculated the bridge builder. Armiston chuckled.

"I don't believe in using coinci-

dence in my stories," said Oliver. "But occasionally in real life it is necessary. Eh, Parr?" He fixed a quizzical look on the old man-hunter. "It seems that several gentlemen, whom we may designate generically as 'They'"—he shot a look at Belden—"waited on Mr. Parr last night. They had a 'hush' job for him. They explained that a certain mogul of the Street, at a critical moment, had casually tossed everything he owned over his left shoulder, including a wife and family at Coronado, and stepped off the earth—with a left-handed lady."

"Winchester?" exploded Belden. Oliver nodded.

"'They' want him back. That's Parr's job. Not to save his mortal soul. 'They' don't give two whoops for that. But to save themselves."

Belden cursed softly under his breath. That his enterprise, involving thousands of labor, and millions of dollars, must wait on the mad hour of one weak human being seemed too ironical for credence.

"Would you know him if you saw him?" asked Parr. Belden shook his head and Parr produced a photograph from his pocket.

"Good God!" roared Belden and Oliver, in unison, both jumping up.

"You do know him?" cried Parr.

"Know him!" bellowed the engineer, galvanized into action. "Know him? Didn't he let his woman kick me out of my own

house four nights ago?" He seized his hat and stick. "He'll know me, before I get through with him."

There was a dog howling. They had just crested the hill.

"Isn't that Grinder?" This from Armiston, in sharp-drawn exclamation.

Belden and Armiston started forward at a sharp run. Parr caught up at the turn of the road.

"It *is* Grinder. Under that window," said Oliver, and they hurried on.

On the kitchen porch, half covered with drifted snow, was a pile of things, supplies left by the boy from the store. The boy had stuck a note in the crack of the kitchen door. It read:

DERE SIR. The eggs and milk are in the potato bin. I built a fire. I saw a rat. I set the trap.

"Made their get-away, eh?" remarked the sardonic Parr.

Belden threw open the barn door. The car had not been moved. He looked up at the chimneys; they were cold.

He and Oliver put their shoulders to the stout old door. Parr added his weight to the task, and the door fell with a crash.

The room was as they had left it. Her mink coat and toque and a purple veil lay on an ottoman; the chess book, leaves open, rested on its stool before the fireplace. The

fire was dead, its ashes stone cold. With a curious constriction of the throat Belden started for the stairs, his companions shuffling at his heels. The pink room they left to the last.

"Damn that woman!" Belden was muttering under his breath, obsessed now with horror. He thrust the door open. A faint musty odor met his nostrils. The wintry light struggling in through half-drawn curtains discovered to them what they sought: First their eyes picked up her little intimate luxuries of dress—a pair of tiny mules lying before a chair, a peignoir dropped carelessly across the foot of the bed; there, as if in serene sleep, lay the woman, one long white hand resting on the coverlet. As they stepped into the room they saw the body of Winchester, where he had dropped before the window.

"He was trying to open that window," said Parr, in his businesslike tone:

It was dark when the old village doctor came, summoned by Parr, who had gone down to the station to wire discreetly to the hierarchical "They," so they could make ready props for the crash. The old man, his long beard and furs tinsel-seled with snow, came in shaking himself like a big dog.

His eyes rested on the woman's garments on the ottoman. Thoughtfully he followed them upstairs; at the door of the pink room

he stopped, sniffing. "Humph!" He took the candle from Belden's hand. "Here, eh? I thought old Jeduthalum had finished sharpening that ax!"

"Ax," said Oliver.

"Ah, there's the other." The doctor swung the candle, and the great shadows of the room revolved with it. He bent down over Winchester. "Cyanosed—do you see that?" Armiston nodded, curious. "Didn't they know about this room?" asked the doctor.

"I told them. But—that woman! She had to find out for herself," said Belden.

"Well, she knows now." The old physician added after a pause, "I don't believe in spirits—but I like fresh air." He threw up the windows, then joined them outside, drawing the door tight behind him. As they descended, Parr was coming in.

"What was it, Doctor?" said Parr. The old man shook his head, thumbing his beard. "Something that has yet to be solved," he said in his quiet voice. "They have been dead for days."

Belden was thinking of the blind blows the dead can strike.

"We must obliterate that woman," he said.

"And that room," said the old man.

Belden took from the mantel-shelf the paper by which only four nights gone by he in a moment of absurd whimsy had granted the

option of this house and these lands to that woman, in consideration of one dollar. He put the paper in his pocket.

The afternoon papers of the next day carried the news of the sudden death of Winchester from an old heart affliction, while sojourning for a few days' rest in the hills of Litchfield County, where he had planned to accumulate lands for a preserve. There was a distinct shock evidenced in the Street, but "They" had placed their props well, thanks to Parr. An obscure notice in another column recited the death of one Agnes Witcherly, a name that attracted no claimants.

"I'll run to town for a day to gather up loose ends," said Belden. "You and Grinder can hold the fort."

"I intend to," said Armiston. "May I prowl? Are there any family records?"

Belden produced the old family Bible and a batch of ancient records. Armiston rescued the eggs and milk from the potato bin. It was while he was thus engaged that Grinder made the noisy discovery of a cage full of trapped rats.

There was something almost providential in this discovery, at least to the eager mind of the extinct author, seeking for leads. He carried the cage with its cowering creatures up-stairs to the pink room, and put a supply of cheese

and water handy for them. Then he shut the windows and withdrew.

It was three days before Belden reappeared.

"What do you make of it?" he demanded as they smoked by the fire. "Nothing, I suspect. No one ever has."

"No one has ever tried, so far as I can find out," retorted Oliver. "I want to ask some questions." Belden nodded. "Two of your granduncles died on the same day—December 5th, 1844: Ebenezer and Jeduthalum. Jeduthalum was the man with the ax. Your grandfather, the surviving brother, wrote against his death, here in the family Bible: 'The Lord is a god of recompenses; He will surely requite.' What about that ax? Was Jed suspected of murder?"

"My grandfather always said he caused Ebenezer's death," said Belden. "Ebenezer was the first to die in that room. The morning they found him dead, they went down to the water-mill to tell Jeduthalum. He had gone down to grind his ax. They found him dead on the snow—brained. A belt had broken—snapped like a whip—crushed his skull. But there was nothing to show he had any connection with his brother's death."

"Then that same winter, Constance Hagar, maiden aunt, died in that room," said Oliver.

"Yes."

"And then what?"

"My grandfather attached no significance to her death," said Belden. "Mortals do die in bed, you know—one bed or another, it's all the same. Still, they did shut up that room. No one used it after that." He paused. "Wait," he said. "There was another, ten years later. No connection—he's not in the Bible. One winter night, in 1854, I think, a no-account toper, Cyrus Whitman, crawled in there when no one knew—dead in the morning."

"And then?"

"That was the last straw. Things had been going from bad to worse—road leaving them, and all that. My grandfather closed up the place, abandoned it. When my father came into the property he never occupied it permanently. . . . It's queer," said Belden slowly. "I myself have slept in that room several times."

"You have?" Armiston leaned forward.

"Sheer bravado. When I was in college, my father and I used to come up here summers, fishing. Does it surprise you?"

"No," said Armiston unexpectedly. "I've got a cageful of rats up there. I feed them every morning. They seem to like it. Tell me more about this Jeduthalum. The chain seems to start with him."

Belden combed his memory. His disjointed recollections came out in scrappy sentences: Jeduthalum was wild—had been a sailor, a gold

digger, a traveling tinker. He had spent his patrimony, and would return now and again, to cajole and threaten his brothers. His visits weren't all bad, however. Occasionally he would come back in funds, and bring some ingenious implement from the outer world, or some idea for improving the place. He had induced them to put water in the kitchen. He put up the furnace, an old wood-burning affair—an innovation.

Oliver walked about while Belden talked. When Belden ceased he continued his prowling, from one room to another. When he returned, Belden was in the cellar. He had started a fire in the furnace and was bedding it down for the night.

Just before breakfast the next morning Armiston walked in with his cage of rats—all dead! He set it down outside, and regarded it queerly.

"Last night?" gasped Belden. Oliver nodded. The thing had struck again, while they slept.

"Now I go to the bottom of it!" cried Belden savagely. "This house must stand till it gives up its secret."

"Does anything occur to you?"

Belden shook his head.

"I can make a long guess," said Armiston. He turned at the sound of the dog barking. "In fact, here comes the man now who sent Winchester and that woman to their reward."

The grocer's boy came stamping up the creaking steps.

"Son," said Oliver, "what time was it when you built the fire the other morning—last week Tuesday, I mean."

"'Bout six o'clock in the mornin'," said the boy. "Why? Did it go out? I couldn't raise nobody. But I left a note."

"No; it was all right—I just wondered. Tell the doctor we'd like to see him later in the day. Will you, like a good fellow?"

As the boy went off, the mystified Belden turned to Armiston.

"What are you driving at?"

"It was in winter, when Ebenezer, Constance, and the no-account man died in that room. Wasn't it?" asked Armiston.

"Yes. What of it?"

"That boy, on your instructions, built a fire in the furnace at day-break while Winchester and that woman were still asleep," said Oliver.

"Good God! What do you mean?" cried Belden.

"You built a fire last night in the furnace. This morning my rats are dead. Do you follow me?"

"Yes—yes—"

"Jeduthalum built that furnace," went on Armiston. "Well, there you are. There is something in that room—what it is I cannot pretend to say. I don't know. But I know it gives off deadly fumes when the heat strikes it. If Jeduthalum put something there to finish Ebene-

zer, he probably intended to take it away as soon as it had done its work. But the hand of God had struck him, while he was grinding his ax. The stuff has been there ever since. Whenever the heat has been turned on in the pink room, someone has died. Other times it is harmless. Let us find out the answer . . . First, we will draw the fire."

They waited until they thought it would be safe for them to investigate the room up-stairs; then they went to work. They had ripped up the floor around the register when the old doctor came up the stairs, sniffing.

"What have you got there?" asked the doctor. Oliver passed him, on a dustpan, the fragments of an old box. The doctor pushed aside the pieces with a pencil.

"Jed really did it, eh? I always

thought so. I've been wondering," he said vaguely, "about that smell . . . It has haunted me ever since . . . I was coming up here myself to find out."

"But what is it?" demanded Belden.

The doctor uncovered a dusty lump of some substance the size of an egg.

"Cyanide," he said, peering. "Heat it—to ninety, or a hundred degrees—it gives off a deadly gas—cyanogen."

The Half-Way House still stands. It was restored, and a road built to it, and a modern heating plant installed. The shutters have been so well repaired that no longer on stormy nights can one hear the ghost horse "stamping."

The pink room is now a sun parlor.

Eric Ambler

Case of the Gentleman Poet

Eric Ambler, author of that modern classic of the secret service, A COFFIN FOR DIMITRIOS, once wrote a series of pure detective stories about a clever Czech refugee, Dr. Jan Czissar—"late Prague Police, at your service (click, click)!" These tales reveal not only Mr. Ambler's subtle understatement and enviable economy but also a delightful blend of English crime writing and unexpected Continental flavor . . .

IT WAS AFTER THE MURDERER OF Felton Spenser had been tried and convicted that Assistant Commissioner Mercer finally became resigned to the occasional intrusions of Dr. Jan Czissar into the affairs of New Scotland Yard.

For that reason alone, the case would be worth reporting. The conversion of an assistant commissioner of New Scotland Yard into an ordinary human being must be reckoned a major triumph of the power of reason over the force of habit. But the case has another claim to the interest of students of criminology in general and, in particular, of those who contemplate committing murders of their own. It demonstrated clearly that the first requisite for the committal of a perfect murder is the omniscience of a god.

The world first heard of the death of Felton Spenser late one January evening.

A B.B.C. announcer said: "We regret to announce the death in London tonight of Mr. Felton Spenser, the poet. He was 53. Although Mr. Spenser was born in Manchester, the early years of his life were spent in the county of Flint, and it was in praise of the Flint countryside and scenery that much of his poetry was written. His first collection of poems, 'The Merciful Light,' was published in 1909. Mr. Marshall Grieve, the critic and a friend of Spenser's, said of him tonight: 'He was a man without enemies. His verse had a placid limpidity, rarely met with nowadays and it flowed with the lyrical ease of his beloved Dee. Although of recent years his work has not received the attention which it has deserved, it remains an enduring monument to a man with many friends and an abiding love of nature.'"

It was left to the newspapers to

disclose the fact that Felton Spenser had been found shot in his Bloomsbury apartment. His friend, Mr. Marshall Grieve, the author-critic, had reported finding him. There had been a revolver by his side, and it was said that Spenser had recently been suffering from fits of depression.

To Assistant Commissioner Mercer, Detective Inspector Denton ultimately brought further details.

Felton Spenser had lived in the top apartment of a converted house near Torrington Square. There were three other apartments below his. The ground floor was occupied by a dress-maker and her husband named Lobb. On the second floor lived Mr. Marshall Grieve. The third floor was unoccupied. The dead man's apartment consisted of two large rooms, used as bedroom and sitting-room, a smaller room used as a study, a kitchen and a bathroom. It had been in the sitting-room that his body had been found.

At about 6:30 that evening the sound of a shot had come from the top of the house. The dressmaker's husband, Mr. Lobb, who had just returned home, ran to the door of his apartment. At the same moment, Mr. Grieve, who had also heard the shot, had appeared at his door at the head of the first flight of stairs. They had gone up together to investigate.

After breaking down the door of Felton Spenser's apartment, they

had found Spenser half sitting, half lying on the sofa, his arms extended and his hands turned back as though he had in the throes of death gripped the edge of the sofa. The body had been rendered rigid by the cadaveric spasm. The appearance of the wound, which was such as to have caused instantaneous death, suggested that when the shot had been fired the revolver had been within an inch or two of the head.

Grieve stated that Spenser had been suffering for some time from fits of intense depression. He knew of several possible causes. Spenser had been profoundly disappointed by the reception accorded to a book of his poems published a year before and had spoken bitterly of being neglected. He had also been in financial difficulties. He had never earned a living from his work and had lived on a small income left to him by his wife, who had died five years previously.

He had, however, Grieve believed, been speculating with his capital. He had also been a very generous man and had lent large sums of money to his friends. Grieve had seen him earlier in the day of his death. Spenser had then told him that his affairs were in a bad way, that he was very worried, and that he was seeing his solicitor the following day in an effort to salvage some of his losses.

This statement was confirmed by the solicitor in question. Shortly

before 5 o'clock in the afternoon of the day on which Spenser had died, he had received a telephone call from Spenser who asked for an appointment for the following day. Spenser had seemed agitated in his manner on the telephone, but that fact had not at the time impressed the solicitor, as his client had always seemed to him to be a trifle neurotic.

The revolver, reported Denton, was an old pin-fire weapon of French manufacture, and unregistered. Spenser could have obtained it in a variety of ways. The same applied to the ammunition. Only one shot had been fired from the revolver. The markings on the bullet extracted from the dead man's head showed that it had come from that particular revolver. The only distinguishing feature about the weapon was a series of marks near the muzzle which suggested that at some time a silencer had been fitted to it. No silencer had been found in the apartment. According to the medical report, the wound showed every sign of having been self-inflicted.

There was, in Denton's opinion, only one curious thing about the case. That thing was the draft of an unfinished letter lying on the desk in the study. It was written in pencil and much corrected, as if the writer had been choosing his words very carefully. It began:

"As I told you yesterday, I was serious when I said that unless the

money was repaid to me by today I would place the matter in the hands of my legal advisers. You have seen fit to ignore my offer. Accordingly I have consulted my solicitor. Need I say that I regret the necessity which forces me to take this step? I think not. Need I say that, if I could afford to overlook the whole unpleasant matter, I would do so eagerly? Again, I do not think so. In asking for the return of the money, I . . ."

There the letter stopped.

Mercer considered it. "Looks pretty straightforward to me," he said at last. "According to Grieve, he'd been in the habit of lending people money. It looks as though, having found himself hard pressed he was trying to get a little of it back. What does his bank account show?"

"Well, sir, he'd certainly got rid of some money. He'd bought some doubtful stock and lost a bit that way. Six months ago he drew out £500. Maybe that was this loan he was trying to get back. Funny idea, though, handing it out in cash. I couldn't find any note of who had it, either. By the look of his place, I should say he was the sort who lights his pipe with important papers. I suppose it's being a poet that does that for you. My wife's got a book called 'Pearls From the Lips of Poets' with one of his pieces in it. It's about a sunset and it's the kind that doesn't rhyme. I can't say I cared for it myself. A bit

weird." He caught Mercer's eye. "But I thought that letter was a bit curious, sir. Why should he get up in the middle of writing a letter and shoot himself?"

Mercer pursed his lips. "Ever heard of impulse, Denton? That's how half the suicides happen. One minute a man's looking cheerful. The next minute he's killed himself. 'Suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed' is the formula. Any life insurance?"

"Not that we can trace, sir. There's a cousin in Flint who inherits. Executors are Grieve and the solicitor."

"Grieve's important. What sort of witness will he make?"

"Good, sir. He looks impressive."

"All right, Denton. I'll leave it to you."

And to Denton it was left—for the moment. It was not until the day before the inquest was due to be held that Dr. Czissar sent his card in to Mercer's office.

For once, Mercer's excuse that he was too busy to see Dr. Czissar was genuine. He was due at a conference with the commissioner and it was to Denton that he handed over the job of dealing with the refugee Czech detective.

Again and again during the subsequent conference Mercer wished that he had asked the doctor to wait and interviewed him himself. Since the first occasion on which Dr. Czissar had entered New Scotland Yard armed with a letter of

introduction from an influential home office official, he had visited Mercer several times. And on every occasion he brought disaster with him—disaster in the shape of irrefutable proof that he, Dr. Czissar, could be right about a case when Mercer was wrong.

He tried to put Dr. Czissar out of his mind and concentrate on the business in hand; but he found his mind wandering from the larger questions of police administration to the smaller but more consuming questions raised by Dr. Czissar's visit. What did Dr. Czissar want to see him about this time? Could it be the Birmingham trouble? Surely not. The Soho stabbing? Scarcely. The Ferring business? Impossible. The questions continued. There was only one such question that Mercer did not ask himself: "Is it the Spenser suicide?" The idea did not enter into his head.

When at last he returned to his office, Denton was waiting for him, and the expression of exasperated resignation on Denton's face told him all he wanted to know about Dr. Czissar's visit. The worst had happened again. The only thing he could do now was to put as stony a face as possible on the impending humiliation. He set his teeth.

"Ah, Denton!" He bustled over to his desk. "Have you got rid of Dr. Czissar?"

Denton squared his shoulders. "No, sir," he said woodenly; "he's waiting downstairs to see you."

"But I told you to see him."

"I have seen him, sir. But when I heard what he had to say, I thought I'd better keep him here until you were free. It's about this Spenser business, sir. I'm afraid I've tripped up badly. It's murder."

"No question of opinion, I'm afraid. A clear case. He got hold of some of the evidence from that newspaper friend of his who lends him his pass. I've given him the rest. He saw through the whole thing at once. If I'd have had my gumption I'd have seen through it too. He's darn clever, that Czech."

Mercer choked down the words that rose to his lips. "All right," he said as calmly as he could, "you'd better bring Dr. Czissar up."

Dr. Czissar entered the room exactly as he had entered it so many times before—thousands of times, it seemed to Mercer. Inside the door, he clicked his heels, clapped his umbrella to his side as if it were a rifle, bowed, and announced loudly: "Dr. Jan Czissar. Late Prague police. At your service!"

Mercer said formally: "How do you do, doctor. Sit down. I hear that you have something to tell us about the Spenser case."

Dr. Czissar's pale face relaxed. His tall, plump body drooped into its accustomed position beneath the long drab raincoat. The brown, cowlike eyes beamed through the thick spectacles.

"You are busy. I do not wish to interrupt. It is a small matter."

"I understand that you think Felton Spenser was murdered."

The mild eyes enlarged. "Oh, yes. That is what I think, Assistant Commissioner Mercer."

"And may I ask why, doctor?"

Dr. Czissar, cleared his throat and swallowed hard. "Cadaveric spasm," he declaimed as if he were addressing a group of students, "is a sudden tightening of the muscles of the body at the moment of death which produces a rigidity which remains until it is succeeded by the lesser rigidity of rigor mortis. The limbs of the dead person will thus remain in the positions in which they were immediately before death for some time. Cadaveric spasm occurs most frequently when the cause of death is accompanied by some violent disturbance of the nervous system such as would be produced by apoplexy or a shot through the head. In many cases of suicide by shooting through the head, the weapon is held so tightly by the cadaveric spasm in the dead hand that great force is required to remove it."

Mercer gave a twisted smile. "And although there was a cadaveric spasm, the revolver was found on the floor. Is that your point? I'm afraid, doctor, that we can't accept that as proof of murder. A cadaveric spasm may relax after quite a short time. The fact that the hand had not actually retained the weapon is not proof that it did not fire it. So . . ."

"Precisely," interrupted Dr. Czissar. "But that was not my point, assistant commissioner. According to the medical report, which the inspector has been good enough to tell me, the body was in a state of unrelaxed cadaveric spasm when it was examined an hour after it was discovered. The fingers of both hands were slightly crooked, and both hands were drawn backwards almost at right angles to the forearms. But let us think."

He drove one lank finger into his right temple. "Let us think about the effect of a cadaveric spasm. It locks the muscles in the position assumed immediately before death. Very well, then. Mr. Spenser's right hand immediately before his death was drawn backwards almost at right angles to the forearms. Also, the fingers of that hand were slightly crooked. It is not possible, Assistant Commissioner Mercer, to hold a revolver to the head and pull the trigger with the hand in that position. I contend, therefore, that Mr. Spenser did not inflict the wound himself."

Mercer looked sharply at Denton. "You saw the body before it was moved. Do you agree with this?"

"I am afraid I do, sir," said Denton.

Mercer contained himself with an effort. "And what did happen, doctor?"

"In the first place," said Dr. Czissar, "we have to consider the

fact that on the evidence of the dressmaker no one left the house after Mr. Spenser was killed. Therefore, when the police arrived, the murderer was still there. Inspector Denton tells me also that the entire house, including the empty apartment on the second floor, was searched by the police. Therefore, the murderer was one of the three persons in the house at the time—the dressmaker, Mrs. Lobb, her husband, who returned home shortly before the shot was heard, and Mr. Grieve. But which?

"Mr. Lobb states that on hearing the shot, he ran to the door of his apartment and looked up the stairs where he saw Mr. Grieve appear at the door of his flat. They then went up together to the scene of the crime. If both these men are innocent and telling the truth, then there is an absurdity—for if neither of them shot Mr. Spenser, then Mrs. Lobb shot him, although she was downstairs at the time of the shot. It is not possible. Nor is it possible for either of the men to have shot him unless they are both lying. Another absurdity. We are faced with the conclusion that someone has been ingenious.

"How was the murder committed?" Dr. Czissar's eyes sought piteously for understanding. "How? There is only one clue in our possession. It is that a microscope examination of the revolver barrel showed Inspector Denton that at some time a silencer had

been fitted to it. Yet no silencer is found in Mr. Spenser's apartment. We should not expect to find it, for the revolver probably belongs to the murderer. Perhaps the murderer has the silencer? I think so. For only then can we explain the fact that when a shot is heard, *none of the three possible suspects is in Mr. Spenser's room.*"

"But," snapped Mercer, "if a silencer had been fitted, the shot would not have been heard. It was heard."

Dr. Czissar smiled sadly. "Precisely. Therefore, we must conclude that two shots were fired—one to kill Mr. Spenser, the other to be heard by the dressmaker's husband, Mr. Lobb."

"But only one shot had been fired from the revolver that killed Spenser."

"Oh, yes, assistant commissioner, that is true. But the murder was, I believe, committed with two revolvers. I believe that Mr. Grieve went to Mr. Spenser's apartment, armed with the revolver you found, at about six o'clock or perhaps earlier. There was a silencer fitted to the revolver, and when the opportunity came he shot Mr. Spenser through the head. He then removed the silencer, smudged the fingerprints on the revolver and left it by Mr. Spenser on the floor. He then returned to his own flat and hid the silencer. The next thing he did was to wait until Mr. Lobb returned home, take a second

revolver, which may, I think, have been of the useless kind which is sold for frightening burglars, go up into the empty flat, and fire a second but blank shot.

"Mr. Lobb—he will be the most valuable witness for the prosecution—says in his evidence that, on hearing the shot, he ran to his door and saw Mr. Grieve coming out of his apartment. It sounds very quick of him, but I think it must have taken Mr. Lobb longer than he thinks. He would perhaps look at his wife, ask her what the noise was, and then go to his door. Yet even a few seconds would be plenty of time for Mr. Grieve to fire the shot in the empty flat, descend one short flight of stairs, and pretend to be coming out of his door to see what had caused the noise."

"I gathered that you had Grieve in mind," said Mercer grimly; "but may I remind you doctor, that this is all the purest supposition. Where is the proof? What was Grieve's motive?"

"The proof," said Dr. Czissar comfortably, "you will find in Mr. Grieve's flat—the silencer, the second revolver, the perhaps pin-fire ammunition. He will not have got rid of these things for fear of being seen doing so. Also I suggest that Mr. Lobb, the dressmaker's husband, be asked to sit in his room and listen to two shots—one fired in Mr. Spenser's room from the revolver that killed Mr. Spenser, the other, a blank shot, fired in the

empty flat. You will find, I think, that he will swear that it was the second shot he heard. The two noises will be quite different.

"For the motive, I suggest that you consider Mr. Grieve's financial arrangements. Some months ago Mr. Spenser drew £500 in cash from his bank. There is no doubt, I think, that Mr. Grieve had it. While we were waiting for you, assistant commissioner, I suggested to the inspector that some information about Mr. Grieve's income would be helpful. Mr. Grieve, we find, earns a little money writing. He is also an undischarged bankrupt. He would, therefore, prefer to receive so large a sum in notes instead of by check. Also, we have only his word that Mr. Spenser lent money freely. I have no doubt that Mr. Grieve obtained the money to invest on Mr. Spenser's behalf, and that he took it for himself. Perhaps you will find some of it in his flat. Mr. Spenser had discovered the theft and threatened to expose him. The letter he was writing was to Mr. Grieve. But Mr. Grieve did not wait to receive it. He decided to kill Mr. Spenser. The fact that he had this old revolver and silencer no doubt suggested the method."

Dr. Czissar sighed and stood up. "So kind of you to receive me, Assistance Commissioner Mercer. So kind, inspector." He gave them a pale smile. "Good afternoon."

"One moment, doctor."

Mercer had risen to his feet. There was nothing left for him to say that would change the fact of his defeat and he knew it. The hope that Dr. Czissar would one day prove that he was no more infallible than other men had been deferred too often for him to derive any comfort from it. He did the only thing he could do under the circumstances.

"We're very much obliged to you, doctor," he said. "We'll always be glad of any help you can give us."

Dr. Czissar's pale face reddened. "You are too kind," he stammered. And then for once, his English deserted him. "It is to me a great . . ." he began, and then stopped. "It is for me . . ." he said again. He could get no further, and abandoned the attempt to do so. Crimson in the face, he clicked his heels at each of them in turn. "An honor," he said in a strangled voice.

Then he was gone. They heard the long, drab raincoat flapping hastily, down the corridor.



Erle Stanley Gardner

Death Rides a Boxcar

A short novel by the creator of Perry Mason and the most popular writer of fiction, judged by total sales throughout the world, in the entire history of man's persistent efforts to find les mots justes . . . The two detectives in this short novel are named "Gabby" Hilman and Jayson Burr. Since this story was written 18 years ago—long before the Perry Mason TV show, starring Raymond Burr—Mr. Gardner's choice of the surname "Burr" is an extraordinary anticipation . . .

WHEN THE LEG GAVE ITS FIRST warning twinge, I stood still for a while and let the rest of the crowd stream on past, up the sloping passenger exit of the big Los Angeles terminal, up to the place where friends and relatives, wives and sweethearts waited in a roped-off space.

It was going to be a job, remembering to favor that leg, but anything was better than hanging around the insipid routine of the hospital.

"Gabby" Hilman was coming in by bus. He was to meet me at the Palm-Court Hotel somewhere around ten o'clock. Until then I was just killing time. I could have started a little celebration over my release from the hospital, but I didn't want to do it without Gabby. He'd been my buddy, and I wanted to start even with him.

There was no such thing as get-

ting a cab to yourself these days. They piled them in two, three, and four at a time. A starter grabbed the light bag I was carrying. "Where to?" he asked.

"Palm-Court Hotel."

"Get in."

He held the door open, and then was when I saw the class waiting in the cab.

She moved over as I got in. For a moment her eyes rested on mine—large, dark eyes that were built to register expression.

I was careful about getting into the cab. "Sorry if I'm a little awkward," I apologized. "I'm nursing a knee back to life."

She smiled a cordial enough smile, but she didn't say anything.

The cab starter said abruptly, "Where to, sir?" and a man's voice answered, "The corner of Sixth and Figueroa Street."

The cab starter said, "Hop in."

A woman came through the door first, an elderly, white-haired woman with a beaming, cheerful face and kindly gray eyes that blinked at me through silver-rimmed spectacles. The man with her looked to be somewhere around seventy, so I pulled down the jump seat and moved over. It was rather a slow process, because I didn't want to throw the leg out, and I thought the girl on my left watched me with just a little more interest than she'd shown before.

The elderly woman moved over to the middle of the seat, the man got in on the right side. The cab door slammed, and we were off.

It was a short run up to Sixth and Figueroa. The man and the woman got off. The girl said to me, "If you're going much farther, you'd better come back to a more comfortable seat."

"Thanks," I told her, and moved back.

Her eyes were solicitous as she watched the way I moved my leg. "Hurt?" she asked.

"It's just a habit," I told her. "It will take me some time to get accustomed to throwing the leg around."

She didn't say anything more for a while, and not knowing just how far she was going, I decided I'd have to work fast. I took a notebook from my pocket, pulled out a pencil, said, "I'm an investigator gathering statistics for a Gallup poll. These are questions we have

to ask in the line of duty. Have you purchased war bonds?—Not the amount; just yes or no."

She looked at me with a peculiar, half-quizzical expression, and said shortly, "Yes."

"Question number two," I went blithely on. "Do you feel sympathetic toward the personnel in the armed forces?"

"Of course."

"Question number three. Recognizing the fact that members of the armed forces whom you may encounter are frequently far from home, inclined to be lonely, and with no personal contacts, do you feel it is not only all right, but commendable, to let them make your acquaintance and perhaps, under favorable circumstances, act as your escort for an evening?"

I looked up at her expectantly, holding the pencil poised over the page.

There was just a twinkle in the dark eyes. "You're asking this question impersonally, of course?"

"Oh, *certainly*."

"Only as an investigator?"

"That's right."

"Collecting statistics?"

"Correct."

"Therefore, I presume you ask these questions of every woman you encounter who is over eighteen and under thirty?"

She had me there. I saw a bit of triumph in her eyes. "That's not exactly correct," I said.

"Why not?"

"Over *sixteen* and under eighty," I told her, without smiling. "My employers want the field thoroughly covered."

She laughed, and just then the cab made a little lurch as it swung in to the curb over on the left side of the street. "I'm sorry, soldier; here's where I get off."

"Question number four," I said, "correct name, address, and telephone number."

She just laughed. The cab driver came around and opened the door for her.

"Good night," she said.

I closed the notebook and slipped it back in my pocket. Gabby could probably have done better. He's a whiz at pulling a line out of thin air and getting by with it.

She flashed me a smile. I raised my hat.

In a few minutes we pulled up in front of the Palm-Court. I paid the driver and started easing my weight out of the cab.

My hand, resting on the seat cushion, felt something move. I looked at it. It was a woman's black leather purse. Returning that purse might give me a chance to begin all over again—starting where I had left off.

I should have said to the cab driver, "That woman left her purse," but there's no use insulting Fortune when she gives a fellow an opportunity like that. I simply slid the purse under my coat and held it there with my elbow.

"Leg bothering you?" the cab driver asked.

"A little stiff, that's all."

The first thing I saw when I opened the purse in my hotel room was a long, thin strip of paper about 12 inches long, an inch and a half wide, and covered with a string of figures written with a soft pencil. First was the figure 6, four straight lines were just below it; then the figure 23, four lines, and a tally; then 10 and three lines below that—and so on down the entire strip of paper. On the other side a message had been written in the same soft pencil: "Puzzle No. 2 a little after midnight."

That meant nothing to me, so I placed the strip of paper on the bed and turned so the light would shine down into the purse.

There was a wad of greenbacks in there that would have stuffed a sofa cushion.

I felt my heart start pounding as I pulled them out and dumped them on the bed. They were in twenties, fifties, and hundreds, with a small sprinkling of tens and fives.

I started counting. It added up to \$7,523 in currency, with a coin purse containing \$1.68 in small change.

Then a disquieting thought struck me. The girl who had been in the taxi cab had paid her fare when she got to the sidewalk. I distinctly remembered seeing her hand the cab driver the fare. And

I was almost certain she was holding an open purse in her hand as she did so—come to think of it, I was certain. This, then, must be the purse that belonged to the white-haired woman who had got off at Sixth and Figueroa.

I started digging down into the lower regions of the purse.

I found a small leather key container which held four keys, then I took out a lipstick, a compact, four or five cleansing tissues, a small address book of red leather with a loop in front which held a little pencil, and an opened envelope which evidently contained a letter. The envelope was addressed to Muriel Comley, Redderstone Apartments, Los Angeles.

Then I reached for the telephone book.

The voice that answered the telephone sounded very much like that of the girl in the taxicab.

"Is this Muriel Comley?"

An interval—just long enough to be noticeable. Then the smoothly modulated voice saying, "Who is this speaking, please?"

"Before I answer," I said, "I'd like to ask you a question. Did you lose something tonight?—Something within the last hour?"

I felt her voice freeze up. "I'm sorry, if you can't give me your name, I . . . Oh, you mean you've found the purse? . . . Oh!" That last exclamation was filled with sudden dismay. "Will you hold the phone a moment?"

She had gone, leaving me on the singing wire, waiting.

After a while I began to think it was just some sort of a run-around. I could tell she hadn't hung up, but it seemed to be all of two or three minutes since she'd left the phone. Then she was back.

"Yes. I lost my purse. Do you have it?"

Her voice sounded different from what it had before—as though her throat had gone dry. I could imagine how she'd feel when she realized she'd lost a wad of dough like that. "I have it," I said, "and it's all safe—everything that's in it."

She asked, "Is this, by any chance, the man who is collecting information for the Gallup poll on how women feel toward servicemen?"

"None other."

"I'm so relieved. If you'll just send—"

"I'll deliver it in exactly twelve minutes and thirty seconds," I interpolated, and hung up before she could argue the point. . . .

I found the name Muriel Comley on the list of names to the right of the apartment-house entrance without any difficulty. She was in Apartment 218.

I pressed the bell, and almost immediately the buzzer announced that the door was being unlatched.

I pushed through the door and into the lobby. It wasn't the sort of apartment house in which one

would have expected to find a tenant who carried a small fortune in cash around in her purse. Just a typical, medium-priced place.

I went up to the second floor, found 218, and pressed my finger against the door button.

The girl opened the door, smiling at me with her lips. Her eyes were wide and dark. When she turned so they caught the light, I saw she was afraid. There was abject terror in those eyes.

Her lips kept smiling. "Won't you come in? I'm sorry I can't offer you a drink, but the apartment seems to be fresh out of drinkables. . . . So you found my purse? It certainly was stupid of me."

I kept the purse under my coat, holding it against my body with my left arm. I said, "I really couldn't believe it was yours."

"Why?"

"I thought you opened a purse when you paid off the cab driver."

She laughed. "Just a coin purse. I happened to have it in my pocket. Do sit down."

I stretched my left leg out in front of me.

"Is it bothering you?" she asked solicitously.

"No. Just habit. . . . Of course, there are certain little formalities. You can describe the purse?"

"Of course. It's black leather with a silver border and mountings. The metal rib at the top has polished silver roses standing out from a dull background."

"And the contents?"

Her face went blank.

I kept waiting.

"You opened it?"

"Certainly. I had to get your name and address."

She said, "Surely, Mr.—I don't believe I have your name."

"Burr—Jayson Burr."

"Oh, yes. Mr. Burr. Surely you don't doubt that it's *my* purse," and she was laughing at me now, actually making me feel uncomfortable.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to describe the contents."

"Well, let me see. There was my lipstick, my compact, and—Yes, I had left my keys in there."

"Have any trouble getting into the apartment?" I asked casually, and watched her.

She said, without batting an eyelash, "I always keep a duplicate key in my pocket. I've lost my purse before. I'm afraid I'm a bit absent-minded."

"All right. So far we've got lipstick, compact, and keys. What else?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"I'm afraid that's too general an inventory. It would describe the contents of almost any woman's purse."

"Well, let's see," she said archly, as though playing some very interesting game. "Since I'm accused of stealing my own purse—or *am* I accused of stealing it?"

"No accusation," I smiled, "no

stealing. Simply for my own protection."

"That's right; you *are* entitled to some protection. Well, let's see. There was my address book in there, and some cleansing tissues, and—and a coin purse."

"Can you tell me how much money?"

"I'm sorry, I simply can't. I always carry an extra coin purse in my pocket. Sort of mad money, you know; and then carry the balance in—Oh, I suppose there's ten or twelve dollars probably, altogether, but I can't be certain at all."

"And was there anything else?" I asked.

She frowned. "Really, Mr. Burr, I can't remember *all* the little details. Surely I've identified the purse well enough. . . . You have it with you?"

I looked her squarely in the eyes and lied like a trooper. "I decided I'd better leave it in the hotel until you'd identified it."

"Why, what a strange way to—" she broke off and looked puzzled, a frown furrowing her forehead.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but, you see, you failed to describe the most important thing that was in the purse."

She was silent for a matter of seconds, then, abruptly, she got to her feet. "Mr. Burr, I've tried to be patient. I've tried to make allowances. But don't you think that, in the first place, you should have returned the purse to the cab driver?

In the second place, you should have carried your investigation of the contents of the purse only far enough to have ascertained my name and address. In the third place, I *have* described the purse to you—in the greatest detail."

"The exterior."

"The exterior!" she repeated with icy dignity. "And that should be enough in dealing with a *gentleman*."

I just grinned at her.

She said angrily, "You know I *could* have you arrested for taking that purse."

"Why don't you? Then I'll tell the judge to turn it over to you just as soon as you've described the contents."

"That wouldn't help *you* any."

I said, "I don't know much law, but I think you'd have to convince a jury that it was *your* purse before you could convict me of stealing it, wouldn't you?"

Suddenly she was sarcastic: "Very well, if *that's* the way you feel about it I would prefer to lose the purse than put up with your insolence."

She swept toward the door and held it open.

That wasn't the way I had planned the interview to go at all. "Look here," I said desperately; "all I want is a reasonable assurance that—"

"Thank you, Mr. Burr," she interrupted. "All I want is my purse. You admit that you came over here

without it. Therefore, no matter *what* I may say, you can't deliver my purse to me here and now. Under the circumstances, I see no use in prolonging the discussion. I will say this, that if you don't have that purse in my hands before tomorrow morning, I'll have you arrested."

"You can have your purse just as soon as you—"

"I don't care to discuss it any more."

She was watching me as I stood holding my left arm against my side. She must have realized that the purse was under my double-breasted coat, but she said nothing about it. "Good night, Mr. Burr!"

I walked out of the door and said, "Good night," without looking back. I heard the vicious slam of the door.

I was halfway to the elevator before I was aware she was following me.

The elevator was waiting there at the second floor. I pulled the door open and stepped to one side for her to get in.

She walked in ahead of me, chin up, eyes cold. I got in, closed the door, and pushed the button for the ground floor.

Neither one of us said anything.

The cage rattled to a stop. I opened the door, waited for her to get out. She was careful not to touch me as she walked past. Then, as I followed, a man was standing at the horseshoe desk back of the

sign marked "MANAGER." He was a narrow-shouldered chap with thick-lensed spectacles which gave his face a look of studious abstraction. He blinked owlishly in my general direction, and then lowered his eyes to a daybook in which he was making some entries.

The girl cleared her throat loudly, said, "Pardon me."

The man at the desk looked up.

When she was sure his eye was on her, she grabbed for my left arm, which was holding the purse firmly against my body on the inside of my coat.

I was ready for her, and lowered my shoulder.

Her body struck against the shoulder and glanced off. Her hands clawed at my coat.

The clerk at the desk said, in mildly bewildered reproof, "Come, come, we can't have—"

The girl hung on to me. "Will you *please* call the police! This man has stolen my purse!"

The clerk blinked.

I smiled inclusively at him and said, "I've found *a* purse. She *says* it's hers, but she can't identify it."

She said to the clerk indignantly, "I've described it in detail. Please do as I say. Please call the police!"

The clerk looked at me, then looked at her rather dubiously. "You're with Mrs. Comley?" he asked. "Aren't you the lady who just moved in?"

That question did it. She was licked the minute he asked her that.

The clerk seemed surprised by her sudden surrender. "Oh, all *right*," she stormed. "If that's the sort of place this is. If you want to let him get away with my purse, that's all there is to it! Take the purse if you think it will do you any good." She flounced toward the elevator.

I raised my hat. "Good evening," I said, and walked out.

I was dozing in the hotel lobby and didn't see Gabby when he came in. The first I knew, I woke up with a start, and there he was standing over me looking down at me with that good-natured grin of his.

"Hi, soldier," he said.

I came up out of the chair, forgetting everything the doc had told me about the leg. Gabby thumped me on the shoulder, and I made a quick pass at his chin. Then we shook hands.

We went up to the room. Gabby splashed around in the bathtub and I told him all about the purse.

"Where you got this purse now?" Gabby asked.

"I did it up in a bundle and told the hotel clerk the package contained important military documents, to put it in a safe, and to be darn' certain no one else got it."

Gabby, pulling on clean clothes out of his bag, thought things over while he got dressed. "This jane is class?" he asked.

"With a capital C."

"Why wouldn't she tell you what was in the bag?"

"She didn't know. She isn't Muriel Comley."

"Then what was she doing in Muriel Comley's apartment?"

"I don't know. Seemed like she was visiting, from what the clerk said."

"Seems like we'd ought to do something about this," Gabby said, and winked.

"That's the way I felt."

"Maybe Muriel's good-looking," Gabby suggested.

"Could be."

"What," Gabby asked, "are we waiting for?"

"You."

Gabby grinned, adjusted his tie, struggled into his coat, and said, "Let's go."

I rang the bell of 218 and we stood there waiting, tingling with that feeling of excitement which comes from doing something interesting and not being quite certain what is going to happen next. After a few seconds I pressed the button again. When there was still no answer, I said to Gabby, "Perhaps she's been expecting this and decided nothing doing."

"Perhaps she's gone to bed."

I said, "Oh, well then, we wouldn't want to get her up. Oh, no! We'll go right on back to the hotel."

Gabby laughed.

I moved over to the front door, pressed my face against the glass,

looked inside, holding my hands up at the side of my face to shut out the reflection of the street lights. There was no one at the desk. The lobby looked deserted.

"Anything doing?" Gabby asked.

"No. Evidently the clerk's gone to bed and this outer door is kept locked at night."

I pressed a couple of other buttons. On my second try the buzzer on the door whirred into belated sound, and Gabby, pushing against the door, stumbled on into the corridor as the door opened. We walked up the one flight of stairs.

Just as I raised my hand to knock on the door of 218, Gabby caught my wrist. Then I saw that the door lacked about a sixteenth of an inch of being closed. The apartment was dark behind it, and from where I was standing, the door looked to be securely closed. Standing over at Gabby's angle, you could see it wasn't.

We stood there for a second or two in silence, looking at the door. Then Gabby pushed the door open.

I went on in. We found the light switch, snapped on the lights, and Gabby heeled the door shut.

The apartment was just as I had last seen it. Nothing seemed to have been touched or moved.

Gabby tried a door which, it seemed, led to a kitchenette. While Gabby was prowling around in there, I opened the other door.

"Gabby!" I yelled.

Gabby's heels pounded the floor, and his fingers dug into my shoulder as we stood looking at what lay there on the bed.

The body lay sprawled in that peculiarly awkward posture which is the sign of death. By the weird, unreal light cast by a violet globe in the bed lamp I could see his features. I had the feeling I'd seen him before, and recently, too. Then I remembered. "It's the clerk at the desk downstairs," I said.

Gabby gave a low whistle, moved around the end of the bed, paused, looking down at the floor.

"Don't touch it," I warned as I saw him bend over. I moved around and joined him, looking down at the thing on the floor lying near the side of the bed.

It was a club some two feet long, square at one end, round at the other, and covered with sinister stains which showed black in the violet light. There were three rings cut in the billet, up near the round end, and, between these rings, were crosses; first a cross like a sign of addition, then a conventional cross with the horizontal arm two thirds of the way up the perpendicular line, then another cross of addition.

We searched the rest of the place. No one was there.

"I think," I said, "someone's putting in too many chips for us to sit in the game."

"Looks like it to me," Gabby admitted.

We left the door slightly ajar, just as we had found it. We couldn't be bothered with the elevator, but went tiptoeing down the corridor at a constantly accelerating rate and down the stairs. I wanted to get out of the place.

Suddenly down at the far end of the corridor a dog barked twice. Those two short, sharp barks made me jump half out of my clothes and sent a chill up my spine. Gabby moved right along. I doubt if he noticed them.

We didn't say anything more all the way to the hotel. The lobby was deserted. We had the keys in our pockets. We went up to the room. Gabby sat down in the big chair by the window and lit a cigarette. I pulled up my bag and started scooping up the stuff on the bed and cramming it in. When I had my clean clothes packed, I spread out my soiled shirt so I could wrap clothes in it for the laundry. A slip of paper fluttered to the floor.

"What's that?" Gabby asked.

I picked it up. "That's the piece of paper that was in the purse. I put stuff from the purse out on the bed. I'd also dumped my bag—"

"Let's see it."

I handed it over.

Gabby frowned. "'Puzzle No. 2 a little after midnight.' That mean anything, Jay?"

"Not to me."

Gabby's eyes were cold and hard. "Never heard of a switch list—or a puzzle switch?"

"No." I knew then, just from the way Gabby was looking at me, that we were in for something.

"You see, Jay, there's just a chance this is a trap we're being invited to walk into."

"Sort of a will you walk into my parlor asked the spider of the fly?" I inquired inanely.

"Exactly."

"So what do we do?"

Gabby's lips were a thin line. "We walk in. Come on, Jay. We're going to the freight yard. I have to see a man down there anyway; and this is as good a time as any."

We got across the yards in a series of jerks and dashes to a big wooden building. Gabby led me up a flight of stairs, down a long corridor lined with offices, and pushed open a door.

A man who had been writing down figures on the page of a book glanced up. An expression of annoyance gave way to astonishment. Then the swivel chair went swirling back on its casters as he jumped to his feet.

"You old son of a gun!" the man exclaimed.

Gabby gave that slow grin of his, said, "Fred, this is Jay Burr," and to me, jerking his head toward the man in the green eyeshade, "Fred Sanmore."

Just then a train came rumbling on through and it sounded as though the building was within a half-mile or so of a heavy bombardment. Everything shook and

trembled. The roar of sound filled the room so there was no chance to talk. We simply sat there and waited.

When the train had passed, Sanmore went over back of the desk, took off his eyeshade, and said to Gabby, "You so and so, you want something."

"How did you know?" Gabby asked.

"Because I know you. You're here on furlough. This is your first night in town. You've been here for a couple of hours. By this time you'd be buying drinks for a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead if you didn't want something. What is it?"

For a moment he and Gabby looked at each other.

Then Gabby pulled the strip of paper out of his pocket. "List of cars going past the puzzle switch?" he asked.

"Probably coming on a switch from over the hump," Sanmore said.

"What," I asked, "is a hump?"

Sanmore started to answer me, then turned to Gabby instead: "Why the commotion?"

Gabby grinned. "I'll bite."

"Why do you want to know, Gabby?"

"Just checking up."

Sanmore sighed and turned back to me: "Sorry, Burr; a hump is the high point on a two-way incline. You push cars up to the hump, then cut 'em loose, and gravity

takes 'em down across the yards. It saves a lot of wear and tear, a lot of steam, releases a lot of rolling stock, and handles a cut a lot faster than you can any other way."

"And a cut?" I asked.

He grinned. "Any number of freight cars taken from a train and switched around yards. Even if it's a whole train. The minute a switch engine gets ahold of it, it's a cut."

Gabby said, "Any idea whose figures these are?"

Sanmore shook his head. "We might be able to find out."

"You're certain that's what this list is?" I asked.

"Positive."

"Would it be too much to ask just what makes you certain?"

He said, "Well, in the first place, notice the numbers. There aren't any of them higher than ninety-seven. We have ninety-seven numbers on our terminal card index. Whenever a train comes in, a switch list is made up, and numbers are put on the cars for the different destinations.

"For instance, here's number one, and underneath it are three lines. That means there are three cars in a row for T N O Manifest. Then here's two lines under number eleven. That means two cars in a row for Indio. Then there are two lines under the figure four, which means two successive cars for the El Paso Manifest.

"Now then, loosen up and tell me what brings you two goofs in

here at this hour of the night to ask questions about railroading."

Gabby said awkwardly, "Just got curious, that was all. Jay thought it might be a code."

Sanmore kept looking at Gabby.

Gabby reached for the strip of paper.

Sanmore started to hand it to him, then idly turned it over.

Gabby grabbed for it.

Sanmore jerked his hand back, read the message on the back: "Puzzle No. 2 a little after midnight." I saw his eyebrows get level.

Gabby didn't say anything.

Sanmore slid down off the corner of the desk. "Come on, you birds."

He led the way down the stairs, out through a door, and up along the tracks bearing off to the left.

"This is a bit tricky," Sanmore said, as the tracks began to converge. "Watch your step along here." Abruptly he reached out, grabbed our arms. "Hold it!"

I couldn't see what had stopped us, when all at once a great bulk loomed out of the night. It was so close and seemed so ominously massive I wanted to jump back, but Sanmore's grip held me. And I realized then that another big shape was moving along just behind me.

"Putting cars over the hump," Sanmore explained.

As the car passed I could hear the sound of its wheels rumbling

along over the steel rails. But its approach had been as quiet as though I had been in the jungle and some huge elephant had come padding softly up behind me.

"All right," Sanmore said.

We moved forward cautiously. My eyes were now alert, and I saw the next car while it was some twenty yards away.

"This is dangerous," Sanmore said. "You get one of those big boxcars rolling along by gravity, and it's like a fifty-ton steel ball moving slowly along an incline. You can't stop 'em; you can't turn 'em. They don't have any whistle or any bell. They don't make very much noise against the background of noise from the yards, particularly when they're coming toward you. . . . Okay; here we are over here, boys. Here's one of the puzzle switches."

A man sat at a complicated switch mechanism, a slip of narrow paper in his hands similar to the one I had found in Muriel Comley's purse. A seemingly endless stream of cars was rolling down the tracks that fed into the intricate mechanism of the switch—a remorselessly steady procession which called for carefully co-ordinated thought and action.

Sanmore said, "He's too busy to talk now. Let's go find the hump foreman."

We started moving up the tracks. I paused as I saw a line of men seated by a stretch of track. In

front of them was a string of holes, and in many of these holes were thrust billets of hickory, substantial clubs some two feet or more in length, identical, as nearly as I could tell, with the club which we had seen by the murdered man.

Sanmore answered my unspoken question. "These are the men who ride the cars down," he said. "The hump is back up here. We put the cars over the hump. The pinmen uncouple the cars in units according to the numbers on them. Then one of these boys—notice that chap on the end now."

Two cars came rumbling down the track. A man swung lazily up out of a chair, picked up one of the hickory clubs, stood, for a moment, by the track, gauging the speed of the oncoming cars, then swung casually up the iron ladder, climbed up to the brake wheel, inserted his billet to give leverage on the wheel, tightened it enough to get the feel of the brakes, and then clung to the car, peering out into the darkness.

The car moved onward, seeming neither to gather speed nor to slow down as it moved. The man at the puzzle switch flipped a little lever. The car rattled across switch frogs, turned to the left, and melted away into the darkness.

A stocky, competent man, who looked hard and seemed to have a deep scorn for anything that wasn't as hard and as tough as he was, came walking down the track.

Sanmore said, "Bob, couple of friends of mine looking the ground over. . . . Whose figures are these?"

The man took one look at the long list of figures on the slip of paper; then he looked at Sanmore, then at Gabby, and finally at me.

"They're *my* figures," he said in a voice that had an edge of truculence. "What about it?"

Silently, Sanmore turned over the slip, showed Cuttering the writing on the back, said nothing.

"Not my writing," he said.

"Know whose it is?"

"No."

"Any idea what this message means?"

"No. Look here; there's a half a dozen of these old lists lying along the tracks. We throw 'em away after a cut has gone over the hump and through the switches. Anyone who wanted to write a message to someone and wanted a piece of paper to write it on could pick up one of these slips."

There was an uneasy silence for half a minute.

"What's so important about this?" Cuttering asked sharply.

"It may be evidence."

"Of what?"

I met the steady hostility of his eyes. "I don't know."

I reached for the strip of paper. "You'll have to make a copy of it," I said. "This one is evidence."

Cuttering looked at me as though I were something he'd combed out of his hair.

Wordlessly, while we watched, he copied off the string of numbers with the lines underneath them. Then, just before he reached the end, he frowned, said, "Wait a minute. . . . We put this through yesterday night about eleven fifteen."

Sanmore didn't waste any more time. His voice was packed with the authority of a man giving an order: "Get me everything you have on that, Bob." Then he turned to Gabby: "We'll check those cars through the Jumbo Book, Gabby, if you think it's that important."

Gabby said simply, "I think it's that important. We're at the Palm-Court. You can phone us there."

Gabby said to the cab driver, "Go a little slow in the next block, will you? I want to take a look on the side street."

The driver obligingly slowed. "This the place you want?" he called back.

"Next street," Gabby said, swinging around to look at the Redderstone Apartments.

Then Gabby and I exchanged puzzled looks. The apartments were dark. The street in front showed no activity. There was no unusual congestion of vehicles parked at the curb.

"Okay?" the driver asked as he crawled past the next side street.

"Okay," I said.

We went on to the Palm-Court, paid off the cab driver, stood for a moment on the sidewalk. Neither of us wanted to go in.

"What do you make of it?" Gabby asked in a low voice.

I said, "We've got to tip off the police."

"We'll be in bad if we do it now."

"We've got to do it, Gabby."

"You don't think the police have been notified, cleaned up the place, and gone?"

I didn't even bother to answer.

"Okay," Gabby said. "Let's go."

We went into the lobby, nodded at the clerk on duty, and I walked over to the telephone booth. Gabby stood by the door for a moment until I motioned him away so I could close the door tightly.

I dialed Police Headquarters, said, "This is the Redderstone Apartments. Did you get a call about some trouble up here—about an hour and a half ago?"

"Just a minute," the voice said at the other end of the line. "I'll check with the broadcasting department. . . . What was it about?"

I said, "You'll find it all right—if it's there."

"Okay. Just a minute."

I held onto the line for several seconds while the receiver made little singing noises in my ear. Then the voice said, "No, we haven't anything from the Redderstone Apartments. Why? What's the trouble?"

"Apartment two-eighteen," I said, "has a murdered man. You should have known about it an hour ago," and slammed up the receiver.

Gabby was waiting for me in the lobby. His brows raised in a question.

"They know nothing about it."

"You reported it?"

I nodded.

Gabby and I went over to the desk to get the key.

The clerk took a memo out of the box, along with the key. "Some young woman's been trying to get you. She waited here nearly half an hour."

"A good-looking brunette with large dark eyes," I asked, "about twenty-two or twenty-three, good figure?"

"Easy on the eyes," he said somewhat wistfully, "but she isn't a brunette. She's a redhead, blue eyes, dark red hair—guess you'd call it auburn. A quick-stepping little number."

"She didn't leave any name?"

"No name."

"Want to wait?" I asked Gabby.

He said, for the clerk's benefit, "Time was when I'd have waited all night on a hundred-to-one chance that a girl like that would come back, but now I want shut-eye."

"Same here," I told him.

We went up in the elevator, and hadn't much more than unlocked the door of the room when the telephone rang.

I picked up the receiver, and the voice of the clerk, who was evidently taking over the switchboard on the night shift, said,

"She's here again. Wants to come up."

"Send her up," I told him, hung up the phone, and said to Gabby, "A redheaded gal is about to cross our paths."

Gabby walked over to the mirror, hitched his tie into position, ran a comb through his wavy hair. "Let's not fire until we see the whites of her eyes. Perhaps she has a friend."

Knuckles tapped with gentle impatience against the panel of the door.

I opened it.

The girl was something to take pictures of and then pin the pictures up on the wall.

"Won't—won't you come in?" I asked.

She walked on in as easily and naturally as though this was where she lived. She took off her gloves, smiled affably up at me, and said, "Which one of you is Mr. Burr?"

I nodded, said, "I have the—"

"Honor," Gabby finished.

We all laughed then and the tension let down. She said casually, "I'm Muriel Comley."

"You are!"

The blue eyes widened in surprise. "Why, yes. Why not?"

I said, "You aren't the Muriel Comley I saw earlier."

She looked puzzled for a minute, and then said, "Oh, you must have seen Lorraine."

"Who's Lorraine?"

"Lorraine Dawson."

"Tell me a little more about Lorraine."

"Lorraine was looking for an apartment on a fifty-fifty basis. I had this place on a lease. It was too big for me, and too much rent. Lorraine came in with me about a week ago."

I said, "You might tell me how it happens Lorraine got hold of your purse."

"She didn't get hold of it. I merely left it in the taxi. I got out. Lorraine stayed in."

"And how did you know where to come for your purse?"

"The taxi driver said you had it."

I raised my eyebrows.

"You see," she said, "I called up the cab company. The purse hadn't been turned in. They got hold of the cab driver. He said he remembered you had picked something up from the seat of the cab when you got out. He thought it might have been the purse."

"I didn't know you had been in that cab."

She sighed. "Lorraine and I went to the depot," she explained with exaggerated patience. "I got out and went to meet a train. Lorraine was coming on home, and wasn't going to wait. I waited down there at the depot for the train to come in. The person I expected to meet wasn't on it. Then suddenly I realized I didn't have my purse. I thought back, and remembered then that I must have left it in the cab. That

was when I called the cab company. Now do I have to explain to you anything more about my private affairs in order to get what belongs to me? After all, Mr. Burr, your own actions are subject to considerable question."

Gabby said, "He's just trying to be sure, that's all."

She turned to him, and her eyes softened into a smile, vivid red lips parted enough to show nice teeth.

I said, "I'm not interested in your private affairs. But, under the circumstances, since you're the second person this evening who has claimed to be Muriel Comley, I'd like some proof."

"Very well," she said, dropped her hand to the pocket of her light coat, and pulled out a transparent envelope which contained a driver's license.

The driver's license was made out to Muriel Comley. The description fit her to a T.

"The purse," she said, "is of black leather with a smooth, glossy finish. The mountings are silver with narrow borders stamped around the edges of the metal, silver curlicues embossed against a dull-finished background. The handles are of braided leather. Is that enough?"

"The contents?"

"You looked inside?"

"Naturally."

She met my eyes. "The purse," she said, "contained something over seven thousand five hundred dollars in cash, in addition to hav-

ing my lipstick, keys, a small coin purse with about a dollar and a half in change, an embroidered handkerchief, some cleansing tissues, an address book, and a compact."

Gabby sighed. "I guess," he said to me, "she gets the purse."

I hesitated.

"Well!" she demanded.

"All right," I said.

At length, after signing my name on a receipt, being the receiving end of suspicious scrutiny from the clerk, I was given the package with obvious reluctance.

Back in the apartment, I unwrapped the purse, handed it to her, and said, "Please count the money."

She opened the purse, took out the money, spread the bills on the floor, counted them carefully. Then she said, "Thank you, Mr. Burr," snapped the purse shut, and started for the door.

Gabby opened it for her. Her eyes caressed his. "Thank you very much, Mr. Hilman," she said, and was gone.

I stood looking after her. "I don't like it," I said.

"For the love of Mike, Jay! Snap out of it! She owns the purse. You've got her address. You—"

"And there's a murdered man in her apartment."

"Well, what of it? You can see she doesn't know anything about it."

"Don't be too certain," I said.

I was just getting into bed, and Gabby, in his pajamas, was sitting on the edge of the chair, smoking a last-minute cigarette, when knuckles tapped seductively on the door.

Gabby looked at me in startled surprise.

Suddenly I remembered. "She's back after that slip of paper, I bet."

"My gosh!" Gabby said. "You got a robe, Jay?"

"Gosh, no," I told him. "You're decent. Go to the door."

"What do you mean I'm decent?" Gabby demanded, looking down at his pajamas.

The light, intimate tapping on the door was resumed. "Stick your head out if you're so damned modest," I said. "After all, she's been married. She must know what pajamas are. Tell her you're going to get dressed and take her down to a cocktail bar."

"That's an ideal!" Gabby barefooted across to the door, opened it a scant three inches, cleared his throat, and said, in the very dulcet tone he reserved for particularly good-looking women, "I'm sorry—you see, I was just getting into bed. I—"

The door pushed open as though a steam roller had been on the other end of it. Gabby jumped up in the air, grabbed his left big toe, and started hopping around in agonized circles.

A tall, competent-looking individual in a gray, double-breasted suit, a gray hat to match, a face that

was lean and bronzed, pushed his way into the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Gabby managed to sidetrack the pain of his skinned toe long enough to get belligerent. "Say," he demanded, "who the hell do you think *you* are? Get out of here, and—"

"Now then," the man announced, "what kind of a damn racket are you two guys pulling?"

Gabby looked across at me.

"And just who are you?" I asked.

"Inspector Fanston. Headquarters. What's the idea?"

"The idea of what?"

"Who was the jane who was just up in the room?"

I said, "I'm not going to lie to you, Inspector. Her mother and I are estranged and she came to beg with me to go home. But I told her nothing doing. I shouldn't have married a woman who was forty-five years older than I was, in the first place, and I should never have had a daughter who was only five years younger. It makes for a terrific strain on the family life. Or don't you think so?"

"Do you," he asked, "think this is a gag?"

"Why not? We're free, white, and twenty-one. And if a woman can't pay us a five minute visit in a hotel bedroom without some house dick —"

"Forget it. I'm not a house dick. I'm from Headquarters. I want to know who the woman was, and

when you get done making wise-cracks, I want to know what the hell the idea was ringing up Headquarters and telling them a murder had been committed at the Redderstone Apartments."

Neither Gabby nor I said anything for a minute.

The inspector grinned, settled down on the edge of the bed, and said: "That makes it different, doesn't it, wise guy?"

"That makes it very much different," I told him. "How—how did you—?"

"Easy," he said. "When the desk sergeant told you he was consulting with the broadcasting system he was tracing the call—pay station here in the hotel. The clerk remembered you going in to telephone, and there's been a cute little number dropping in and picking up packages of military papers. . . . What the hell's the idea? What are you two guys trying to do?"

I cleared my throat. "About the purse," I said.

"Let's talk about the murder first, if you don't mind."

I said, "I—er—thought—"

"Did you, indeed?" he interrupted. "Well, try thinking again. And let's try thinking it out straight this time. I suppose you boys are on the loose for a little night life, and it's okay by me, just so you don't start practical jokes about murders."

"Practical jokes!" I exclaimed. "A man had the back of his head caved in."

"What man?"

"The man in 218 at the Redderstone Apartments."

He said, "Get up and get your clothes on," and nodded to Gabby, "You, too."

We three walked to the Redderstone Apartments and up to the second floor. An officer in uniform was on guard in the living-room of 218. The bedroom was just as we had left it, except now the bed was a spotless expanse of smooth counterpane.

I had been bracing myself for the shock of being called on to identify the body—perhaps being accused of having had something to do with the crime, and wondering just how I could establish an alibi. But the sight of that smooth bed was too much for me. I stood there for a good two or three seconds.

"Any old time," Fanston said.

Gabby and I both started talking at once. Then Gabby quit and let me tell the story. I knew there was only one thing to do. I told it right from the beginning, with the uniformed cop looking at me skeptically and Fanston's eyes drilling tunnels right into my brain.

"You *sure* this was the apartment?"

"Absolutely."

Inspector Fanston didn't give up. "All right; let's concede that he looked dead—that you thought he was dead. Those things don't just happen, you know."

"It happened this time."

"Wait a minute until you see what I'm getting at. Suppose it was all planned."

"A purse is planted where you'll be certain to find it. There's enough money in it so you'll really start doing something about it. It's a foregone conclusion that you're coming to this apartment—not once, but twice. And the second time you come back you find the outer door open. A man is lying sprawled out on the bed. There's a violet-colored bulb in the lamp over the bed. That would make anyone look dead as a doornail."

"My best guess is that it's either some new racket or a frame-up to get you two guys on a spot because you two guys just happen to be you two guys. If it's a racket, you look old enough to take care of yourselves. If either one of you has any particular military information, or is here on some particular mission. . . . Well, I think that now would be a good time to take the police into your confidence."

He looked at Gabby. "Right, soldier?"

Gabby just looked innocent. Then he took a leather case from his pocket, handed it to the officer. "Keep it to yourself," he said.

The inspector turned his back. I saw slight motion in his shoulders as he opened the leather case. Then he was motionless and silent for a few seconds.

I heard the snap of a catch, and

the inspector turned, poker-faced. He handed the leather case back to Gabby.

"Then you don't think there really was anybody?" I asked.

Fanston said, "Hell, no. It was a racket. Now, go home. If you start buzzing these janes in the morning, be careful—that's all." . . .

Gabby snorted. "They're so dumb they think they've fooled us. . . . Do you want to go back to the hotel now, Jay?"

"Hell, no. Let's find out some more about that stick—and what's happening at Puzzle Number Two shortly after midnight."

We found Fred Sanmore still on duty, tired to the point of utter weariness, but still shoving traffic through the yards.

"Look, Fred," Gabby said; "those brake sticks that the men use—does it make any difference which is which?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can any man pick up any stick?"

Sanmore laughed. "Gosh, no. That's a sure way to pick a fight. Each man has his own stick. When a shift comes on duty, they'll bundle up all of the sticks and heave them out as far as they can throw them. The man whose stick goes the farthest puts in the last hole. He's the last one out."

"How do they tell them apart?"

"Oh, various markings."

Gabby said, with what seemed to me just a little too much innocence,

"I don't suppose you happen to know who owns the stick that has three rings out near the end with crosses between the rings?"

"No, but I can find out for you."

"If you could do it quietly," Gabby said, "so your inquiries didn't attract too much attention, that might help."

"Come on up," Sanmore said.

We started up toward the place where the men were sitting in front of the line of pegs. There weren't so many of them now. The cut that was going over the hump was getting pretty well down to the last ten or fifteen cars.

Sanmore left us and talked with two or three of the switchmen in a low voice, then was back to say, "As nearly as I can tell, it's a man named Carl Greester. He went off duty at midnight, but he's still around someplace. He has a friend visiting him in the yards!"

"What do you mean, a friend?"

Sanmore grinned. "I mean a *friend*," and holding up his hands in front of him, he made an hourglass-like outline of a woman's figure. "She came down with a pass from headquarters. And she has another woman with her. Greester is having a confab with them."

"You don't know where Greester lives, do you?" I asked.

"Gosh, no. But I can find out."

"Look, Fred," Gabby said suddenly; "could Jay and I ride one of these cars down to its destination, just to see what it's like?"

"Absolutely against the rules," Sanmore told him brusquely. "If I saw you do it, I'd have to jerk you off the car and have you put out of the yards." And then he deliberately turned his back and walked away.

A big freight car came lumbering down the incline. One of the switchmen, moving with lazy co-ordination, picked up his stick and swung aboard the front of the car.

Gabby and I, acting just as though we had received formal permission from the foreman, walked over to the back ladder.

"You first," Gabby said.

I favored the leg as much as possible, taking it easy up to the top of the car.

"Hang on," Gabby said, as his head came up over the edge of the boxcar. I looked ahead and saw we were right on the puzzle switch, and braced myself, expecting that I would be thrown from one side to the other as the trucks went over the frogs, but the big, loaded car moved along in majestic dignity. There was only a little jar as the wheels underneath us made noise. Then we were gliding out from the well-lighted area into the half darkness, then out to where it was very dark indeed.

We clicked over a couple of other switches, then veered sharply to the right, and were coasting along when I heard a scream coming from almost directly beneath the car.

Gabby was where he could look down on the side. Then he was climbing down the ladder. "Come on, Jay!"

I looked back and caught a glimpse of two girls. A man was with them. Evidently he'd put his arms around them and jerked them back out of the way of the car. Now he was holding them, prolonging the moment of rescue as long as possible.

I forgot all about the leg as I came down the iron ladder, but Gabby was running alongside and eased me to the ground on that last jump.

My knee gave me a little twinge just as we passed a couple of boxcars on a track on the left. I dropped back, said, "Go ahead, Gabby. I'll catch up."

Gabby turned solicitously to look at me, and then I saw him stiffen. At what I saw on his face I forgot about the leg, and whirled.

Three men, armed with brake sticks, were right on top of us. A year ago I'd have been frightened into giving ground and making useless motions, but I'd learned a lot since then. The man who was nearest me raised his club. I shot my left straight to the Adam's apple. I saw Gabby pivot sideways to let a blow slide harmlessly past him, grab the man's wrist, give the arm a swift wrench, then heave. The air became filled with arms and legs as the man went flying up through the darkness, to crash

against the side of a boxcar, then drop limply to the ground.

The man I had hit was on the ground. He made a wild swing at my shins with the brake stick. Automatically, and without thinking, I tried to jump back out of the way. The injured knee gave way without warning. Then the brake stick cracked against my shin and I went down on my knees. Suddenly I lost balance and fell forward. As I fell, I spread apart the first and second fingers of my right hand and jabbed the fingers toward his eyes. If he wanted to play dirty, I could teach him something about that. I'd specialized in it.

I think I heard a faint swish. Something, perhaps the sixth sense which wild things have and which we develop under the spur of life-and-death conflict, warned me. I jerked my head to one side, but not soon enough and not far enough.

The next thing I remembered, I was in a warm, musty darkness with a sore head and an aching sensation at my wrists. I tried to move my arms, and realized my hands were tied behind my back.

From the stuffy, thick blackness I heard Gabby's voice: "How's it coming, Jay?"

"What," I asked, "happened?"

"The guy from behind," Gabby explained. "The one who was with the two girls. He caught you on the head just as you went down. I smeared his nose all over his face with a straight right, and then the

guy behind me hit me just over the kidneys with everything he had."

"What about the girls?"

Gabby said, "The redhead ran away. I think she's gone for help. The other one just stood there watching. The damn spy."

My head was feeling a little better all the time, although it still ached. I said, "If you ask me, it was the redhead who was the decoy. They wouldn't have let her run away if she hadn't been."

Gabby's silence was an all but contemptuous contradiction.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Inside a boxcar."

"What," I asked, "is it all about?"

Once more Gabby was silent, but this time it was the tight-lipped silence of a man who is carefully guarding a secret.

I tried to roll over so I could take some of the pressure off my wrists. My shoulder hurt and it was hard to keep my balance.

Gabby heard me move. "Take it easy, Jay. I'm getting this knot worked loose, I think."

After what seemed a minute or two, Gabby said triumphantly, "I've got it, Jay. Just a minute now and we'll be loose, and then we'll be out of here."

I heard his feet on the planks, heard him starting toward me . . .

With an ominous rumble, the door slid back along its tracks. The beam of a flashlight stabbed into the darkness.

Gabby flung himself flat on the

floor, keeping his ankles crossed, his hands behind his back.

There was a peculiar scuffling sound from the outer darkness, then the sobbing breathing of a woman.

I got my head around to where I could see a little more of what was happening.

Lorraine Dawson was literally lifted and thrown into the car by three men.

The beam of the flashlight swung around and then suddenly stopped. "Do you," demanded a voice, "see what I see?"

I looked along the beam of the flashlight. It was centered on the pieces of rope that Gabby had untied from his wrists and ankles.

The three men were bunched there in the doorway, the beam of the flashlight holding Gabby as a target like a helpless airplane caught in a vortex of searchlights.

Gabby made one swift leap and hit the group feet first.

I heard the thud of his heels striking against flesh. The flashlight was jerked up, looped-the-loop, hit the side of the boxcar, hesitated a moment at the edge of the door, then fell to the tracks. The sounds of bodies threshing around in a struggle, the thud of blows filled the night. All of a sudden there was a lull, then shouts and curses as our assailants piled out of the boxcar. Good old Gabby had given them the slip and was leading them away.

Almost immediately the rumbling noise from the trucks indicated that the car had been banged into rapid motion. The door was still open. I could feel the fresh night air coming in through the opening to eddy around the interior of the boxcar.

"You all right?" I asked the girl.

"Yes. . . . Who are you?"

I managed a grin. "Believe it or not, I'm Jason Burr, who wanted to return the purse you lost. That was when you were masquerading as Muriel Comley. Remember?"

I heard the quick intake of her breath. "How did you get here?" she demanded.

"It's a long story. Would you mind telling me just what your name really is?"

"I'm really Lorraine," she said.

"And who's Muriel?"

"Believe it or not, I don't know. About all I do know is that she had an attractive apartment and wanted a roommate to share expenses. I moved in."

I swung around and managed to get a sitting position. "Would you," I asked, "mind telling me something of what this is all about?"

"I don't know."

"Then perhaps you can tell me why you don't know."

She said, "I only moved in with Muriel a few days ago. She seemed very nice. She'd been married, had separated, and recently secured a divorce. Tonight Muriel was to meet someone who was due to come

in on a train. I don't even know whether it was a man or a woman. We were in town. I wanted to take a cab to the apartment, so I dropped Muriel at the depot. They said the cab had to take on a full load before it started back. You know the rest. I never realized Muriel had left her purse until she telephoned me at the apartment; then, just after she'd hung up, you telephoned."

The cars were rattling and banging over switches, lurching crazily.

"And then you said *you* were Muriel?"

"Yes, of course. I didn't know who you were, but you had Muriel's purse, and I wanted to get it back for her. I thought it was easier to pretend to be Muriel than to do a lot of explaining, and then have you insist on waiting for Muriel to come back to claim the purse."

"And when I got up there," I said, "you were frightened."

"I'll tell the world I was frightened."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

She said, "There was a man in the apartment all the time, hiding in the bedroom. I didn't know it until after you'd telephoned."

The freight car gave a series of short, quick jerks and bangs, slowed almost to a stop, then slammed in another string of cars, and after a moment the whole string began to roll.

"Sounds as though we're making up a train," I said. "Look here; do

you suppose you could lie over on your side and I'd get over as close to you as I could? We'd lie back to back, and you could work on the knots on my wrists with your fingers, and I'd try to untie your wrists."

"It won't cost us anything to try," she said.

We rolled and hitched along the door until we were lying back to back. Somehow, I couldn't get my fingers working. The cords around my wrists made my fumbling fingers seem all thumbs. But she was more successful. I felt the knot slip, heard her say, "I'm getting it, all right.—Ouch! I'll bet I lost a fingernail there.—Hold still; it's coming."

A moment later my wrists were free. I sat up and untied her.

Abruptly, with that jerking lurch which is so characteristic of car switching, the engineer applied the brakes. Lorraine was thrown up against me, and I kept from falling only by grabbing at the side of the car. The partially opened door slammed back until it fetched up with a bang against the end of the iron track, leaving the square doorway wide open. The whole string of cars abruptly slowed.

Suddenly our view was cut off. The doorway seemed to be pushed up against a solid wall of darkness.

"What is it?" Lorraine asked. "A warehouse?"

At that moment the train slammed to a dead stop.

I saw then that our car had been

stopped directly opposite another string of boxcars.

"Can you jump across to the ladder on that car opposite?" I asked quickly.

She didn't even bother to answer, simply leaned out of the car, caught the iron ladder on the car opposite, pulled her skirts high, and stepped across. I had to wait a second for her to climb up, so as to leave me a handhold, and in that second the engine gave a snort and a jerk. The car started forward.

"Quick!" Lorraine shouted.

I just missed her leg as I grabbed an iron rung of the ladder and leaned out. It seemed that the car was literally jerked from under me.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Yes, I took the shock on my other leg." I started down the ladder. "Watch your step," I warned. "The—" I broke off, as I saw the flash of a red light, heard a little toot from the engine whistle, and saw the whole string of cars ahead slide to an abrupt stop. I saw the gleam of a flashlight, then another. Then a beam came slithering along the string of cars.

"Quick!" I said. "Get up to the top and lie down. They're searching for us."

I heard the slight scrape of her feet on the iron rungs as she scampered up the ladder, and I followed, making the best time I could. We flattened out, I on one side of the walk on top of the car, she on the other.

There were voices after that. Shadows danced along the side of a concrete warehouse just above us. I listened, trying to determine whether these men were friends, sent by Gabby to rescue us, or whether they were our captors returning. Then, within ten yards of me, a man's voice said, "This is the end of the cut. They must have swung off while it was moving. They're not in the car. You can see the ropes there on the floor. Why in hell can't Jim tie 'em so that they stay tied!"

Another voice: "You can't hold things up any longer without making everybody suspicious. Give them the high-ball. We'll have to catch 'em as they leave the yards. We'll spread out. They can't get away."

Once more shadows danced. The switch engine gave two muted toots of the whistle, started the string of cars into rattling motion.

"Now what?" Lorraine asked.

"Now," I said, "we get out of here just as fast as we can. Come on; let's go."

"Where?"

"Back to the Redderstone Apartments. Unless I'm mistaken, we'll find a police inspector by the name of Fanston somewhere in the building, and we can get action out of him a whole lot quicker than we can explain to some strange cop. . . . Tell me one thing. You said there was a man in your apartment."

"Yes. He heard me talking on the telephone. I don't know whether you noticed it or not, but I gave an exclamation and then asked you to hold the line a minute."

"I noticed it," I said. "What happened?"

"A man stepped out of the bedroom. The first thing I knew I felt the cold circle of a gun muzzle sticking in the back of my neck. Then the man took me away from the telephone for a minute or two, and demanded to know who was talking. I told him it was just someone who wanted to return Muriel's purse."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"Marched me back to the telephone with instructions to get you up there at any cost and to insist that I was Muriel."

"And when I came up," I asked, "where was he?"

"In the bedroom. He had the door open a crack. He wasn't where he could see—only listen. That's why I pretended to wish you good night, but slipped out after you. All I wanted at the time was to get out. Later on, downstairs, when I saw the clerk on duty, I conceived the idea of trying to make you give up the purse. I knew you had it under your coat."

"You knew that Muriel came to the hotel and got it back?"

"Yes, of course. She told me you gave it to her."

"Did she tell you what was in it?"

"No. What *was* in it?"

"Would you," I asked abruptly, "be shocked to learn Muriel is an enemy agent?"

"Good heavens! She can't be. Why, she's just a young married woman who found out she made a mistake; and . . ."

"And what does she live on?"

"I don't know. She said she was looking for a position. I supposed she had money—alimony, perhaps."

I didn't say anything for a few seconds, letting Lorraine get herself adjusted to the idea I'd given her. Then I said, "Just when did you meet Muriel?"

"A little over a week ago. She had an ad in the—"

"No, no. I mean tonight, after I left."

She said, "When I left the apartment with you I was frightened stiff. I pretended to go back up to the second floor to the apartment. That was just to fool you and the clerk. Actually, I just took the elevator all the way up to the top floor, waited for five or ten minutes. Then I went back down and walked out."

"The clerk there at the desk then?" I asked.

"No. No one was in the lobby."

"Where did you go?"

"There's a little tearoom down the block where Muriel usually drops in for a bowl of milk toast before she comes to the apartment to go to bed. I went there and waited, frightened stiff."

"How long did you wait?"

"It seemed like ages."

"But you don't know exactly how long it was?"

"No. It was quite a while."

"And she finally came in?"

"Oh, yes."

"That was before she had been to see us?"

"No, afterward. She had her purse."

"And you told her about what had happened in the apartment?"

"Yes."

"What did she do?"

"She seemed quite disturbed. She said she'd notify the police, but it would have to wait until tomorrow, because she had an important appointment to keep."

"And how did you happen to come down here?"

"I didn't want to go back to the apartment alone. Muriel said she had arranged for a pass and that I could come with her. She didn't seem particularly anxious to have me, though."

"Then you and Muriel came down here without going back to the apartment?"

"That's right."

"Hadn't it occurred to you to call the police as soon as you got out of the apartment?"

"Of course."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"Because—well, Muriel's rather secretive about her affairs, and somehow I had an idea she—well, she just wouldn't like it, that's all."

"Isn't that rather an unusual way to look at it?"

"I suppose so, but Muriel's secretive and—well, you see, she's had a divorce and—well, you know how those things are. I thought perhaps it might be something that was connected with the divorce, or an attempt on the part of her ex-husband to get evidence so he could get out of paying alimony, or something of that sort."

"Did Muriel tell you who she was meeting?"

"Yes, a man named Greester, but he never showed up."

"And what did he want?"

"Apparently it was something about her husband. Greester wasn't there, and Muriel didn't tell much. We started to walk down the tracks, and then the first thing I knew that car was almost on us. I think I screamed. I remember a man's arm around me, pulling me off the tracks; then I saw you and this other man jump off the car and start toward us. Then three men started toward you—there was that awful fight. I tried to help and—well, they grabbed me and tied me."

"And Muriel?"

"Muriel got away."

"Anyone try to stop her?"

"I think one of the men did. He made a grab for her, but she jerked herself loose."

"It may have been an act?" I asked.

"It might have been an act," she said wearily.

I said, "All right, sister. Now I'm going to tell you something. Muriel is an enemy agent, and in case you want to know what was in that purse, it was a great, big wad of currency totaling seven thousand five hundred dollars. And *that's* why I was so cagey about delivering it."

Lorraine sat perfectly still on top of the boxcar, looking at me, her eyes wide and startled. After a while she said, "I can't believe it."

I didn't argue about it. I peered over the side of the car that was against the warehouse. "I think," I said, "we can manage to squeeze through here. We'll walk back down the length of the train, keeping behind these cars; and we'd better start, I'm going first."

It was dark as a pocket in the narrow space between the cars and the warehouse. There was just room to squeeze along, and I knew that if the train jerked into motion we'd be caught and rolled along between the moving cars and the warehouse until we dropped down under the wheels, but it was our only way out.

Halfway down the string of cars I crawled under and looked back at the track. I could see little spots of light that stabbed the darkness, then subsided, and they were snuffed out, only to glow again. They were still hunting for us.

"See anything?" Lorraine asked as I crawled back to the dark side of the cars.

"No," I said. There was no use scaring the kid to death.

We worked our way down to the end of the cars. There was a stretch of open track, curved rails running up to an iron bumper. Back of that was a concrete wall.

We were trapped.

I felt my way along the wall, hoping I might find a door. Then was when Lorraine saw the flashlights.

"Look," she whispered. "*Lights!* I think they're coming this way."

I simply pulled her in behind the protection of that steel and concrete bumper.

We huddled there for what seemed five or ten minutes. The lights were coming closer. We could see shadows on the wall.

The lights were swinging around now in wider arcs, making bright splotches on the concrete wall, intensifying the shadows. Then, when they must have been within twenty yards of us, they quit altogether.

I got to my hands and knees, held my head low down, and peeked out. The track was a vague, indistinct ribbon vanishing into a wall of darkness. I looked for several seconds and couldn't see anything. I decided to chance it.

We turned off the tracks when we came to the end of the warehouse, walked across the yards, and found a gate that was locked from inside. We unlocked it and went out without seeing a soul.

"You have a key?" I asked Lorraine as we reached the Redderstone Apartments.

She opened her purse, fumbled around for a moment, and handed me a key.

I hesitated before putting it in the lock. "Someone on your floor have a dog?" I asked.

"Yes. I don't know what apartment it is. A cute little woolly dog."

"I heard him barking."

"Yes, he barks once in a while."

"Which end of the corridor from your apartment? Toward the front of the house or the back?"

"The back."

I fitted the key to the lock, held the door open, and Lorraine and I went in. The dimly lit foyer was silent as a tomb.

Halfway to the elevator I paused. "Look, Lorraine; you wait here. If you hear any commotion upstairs, get out just as fast as you can. Go to the nearest telephone and call Police Headquarters. If you *don't* hear anything, wait for me to come back and pick you up."

The door was locked with a night latch. I carefully inserted the key Lorraine had given me and silently slipped back the latch. Then I eased the door open, ready to leap forward and go into action if necessary.

Gabby was sitting in the overstuffed chair, his feet propped up on a straight-backed chair, smoking a cigarette. He was all alone in the room.

"How," I asked, "did *you* get here?"

He turned and grinned. I saw, then, that his left eye was all puffed up. His lip had been cut, and when he grinned it opened up the cut and a few drops of blood started trickling down his chin.

I closed the door behind me. "How'd you make out?"

"Okay," Gabby said. "Did the Military find you?"

"No one found me. I rode a train out of the yards. What about the Military?"

Gabby said, "I sewed that place up. Nobody gets in or out, and they're going through it with a fine-tooth comb."

"Where," I asked, "did you get all that authority?"

"I didn't, I haven't, I ain't," Gabby said. "But in case I forgot to tell you, I'm sort of working under a colonel here, and we're checking up on certain things that happened to freight shipments. At first, we didn't think it could have happened in the freight yards, because the records were all straight, but now we're changing our minds mighty fast. I came here to start tracing this stuff from the time it hit the terminal yards until it was delivered."

"Yes," I said, "you neglected to tell me."

Gabby grinned again. "I was afraid I had. Where's the girl spy?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you."

"Cripes!" Gabby said, frowning. "I thought you'd be able to keep her lined up."

"You mean you didn't see her?"

"No. What happened to her?"

"Just that she took to her heels is all I know."

Gabby straightened up. "Say, who do you think I'm talking about?"

"Muriel."

"Muriel, nothing!" Gabby snorted. "Muriel's little roommate, Lorraine Dawson, is the one I mean."

"You're all wrong, but we won't argue that now. Where is Muriel?"

"In case it's any of your damn' business," Gabby said angrily, "she's in the bedroom changing her clothes."

I started for the bedroom door.

Gabby said, "Don't."

"Why not?"

"She's a decent kid."

I said, "She may be a decent kid, but she's an enemy agent," and flung the door open.

Gabby came out of the chair and toward me fast, but something he saw in my face made him turn toward the bedroom.

It was empty.

"You see?"

Gabby had expression struggling all over his face. He walked across the room to the bedroom window and looked out to the iron platform of the fire escape.

After a minute I said, "Look, Gabby; we're going to get her back. She can't pull this stuff and get

away with it. I think Lorraine can help us."

Gabby turned. "Where is Lorraine?"

"Down by the elevator. I left her there while I came up to see that the coast was clear."

Gabby said, "Go get her. We can't wait."

Lorraine wasn't there.

I walked over to the door and looked out on the street. She wasn't there. I came back and climbed the stairs. No sign of her on the stairs.

I went back to the apartment.

Gabby looked up. "Where is she?"

"I don't know." I said, "Suppose you and I quit making damned fools of ourselves. There was a dead man in that bedroom. I don't know what the big idea was with the police claiming it was a plant. You call the law in on a murder case, and right away they start telling you it's all a pipe dream."

"I know," Gabby said.

"All right; it was a body. You can't pick up a body and carry it downstairs under your arm. You can't change the mattress and the sheet and the blankets and the spread and the pillows on a bed in the middle of the night. The way I see it, there's only one answer."

"The adjoining apartment?"

I nodded.

Gabby said, "How's your leg?"

"Okay."

Gabby said, "Remember, I've got my big automatic, so in case the

party gets rough, let's not break any legs over it."

"We won't," I said.

Gabby said, "If you'd come down to earth and be reasonable, I could tell you what happened—just so you won't crack the wrong girl over the head."

"I won't crack the wrong girl."

"Look, Jay; when Muriel came to her apartment this evening she found a man's suit hanging in the closet. It looked as though the suit had just come back from the cleaners. She noticed a bulge in one of the pockets which turned out to be the seventy-five hundred smackers."

"So little Muriel figures finders keepers."

"Muriel happens to be a gal who can look out for herself. The whole thing struck her as damn' fishy, and she decided to sit tight until she discovered what was going on—or at least part of it. It seems there was quite a splash in the papers when her divorce came up and she's allergic to publicity. She had sense enough to realize that either by design or accident she had become involved in something, and she couldn't be sure her husband didn't have a hand in it. Unless it became absolutely necessary she didn't want the cops in on it."

"I still don't see why she carried all the money around with her."

"She wanted to get it to a place of safekeeping, but a guy started to tail her when she left the apartment.

She was almost sure she had lost him, but just as she was stepping out of the taxi she thought she saw him again. Apparently without Lorraine seeing her, she slipped her purse back on the seat, and got out. As soon as she was certain she had lost the tail she telephoned the cab company to see if the driver had found her purse."

"How come she didn't spill any of this to Lorraine?"

"I didn't ask her, but my guess is that she thought it would be best all around if she didn't."

"And the switch list with the message?"

"Don't be so damn' sarcastic. A railroad friend of hers gave her that, earlier in the afternoon, arranged for a pass. In case you want to know all about her private life, her husband made a property settlement prior to the divorce. Then he ran out on her and quit paying. This man tipped her off that a chap was working on the night shift at the hump who owed her husband a wad of dough, and told her that she could go down there tonight and he'd take her to this man. She wanted to get the rest of the money her husband had promised her on the property settlement and then forgot to pay."

"Who was this friend," I asked, "and will he corroborate her statement?"

Gabby said stiffly, "I haven't had a chance to get her entire story."

I started for the window and got

out onto the steel platform of the fire escape. The window which opened on the farther edge of the platform was closed. I slid my knife blade under it and found it wasn't locked.

"Step to one side as soon as you raise it," Gabby whispered.

I got the window up, and was too mad to care about anything. I slipped under Gabby's arm and went in headfirst. Gabby was behind me with the gun, and he could take care of anything that happened.

Nothing happened.

We were in an apartment very similar to the one we'd just left, only arranged in reverse order. The window opened into the bedroom. I could see the bed. It was clean and white, and apparently hadn't been slept in. For all I could see, there was no one in the apartment, and then somehow I had an uneasy feeling that the place was occupied. You could *feel* the presence of human beings.

We moved on a few steps from the window.

"The light switch will be over by the door," I whispered.

"Think we dare to risk the lights?" Gabby asked.

"Gosh, yes. This place gives me the willies . . ."

"Stick 'em up!"

The beam of a flashlight sprang out of nothing and hit my eyes with such a bright glare that it hurt. I saw Gabby's wrist snap

around, so that his gun was pointed toward the flashlight. Then Inspector Fanston's voice yelled, "Hold it, soldier! This is the law."

Gabby said, "Put out that damn flashlight. What are *you* doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" the inspector asked.

"There's no one here?" Gabby asked.

Fanston said, "Switch on the lights, Smitty."

The light switch clicked the room into illumination.

"Where's the girl?" I asked.

"What girl?" the inspector asked.

"The one that came through the window a few minutes before we did."

"No one came through that window."

"For how long?"

"Ever since we came over here with you. I doped it out that if you saw a body it must have been moved. It looked as though it must have been moved out the window to the fire escape, then across to here. I made a stall to get you boys out of the way, then Smitty and I went to work."

"And you've been waiting here all that time," I demanded, "simply on a hunch that the body might have been—"

"Take it easy," the inspector interrupted. "Show him what we found, Smitty."

The cop opened the closet door. I looked inside, and saw a bundle

of bedclothes wadded up into a ball. There were red splotches on them—blood that wasn't old enough even yet to get that rusty brown tint. It looked red and fresh.

"I'll be damned," Gabby said.

"That's the only way they could have come in," Fanston said. "It's perfectly logical. What's more, there are bloodstains on the iron ribs of the fire-escape platform."

"And why," I asked, "are you guarding the bloody clothes and letting the other apartment take care of itself?"

Fanston looked at Smitty, and the look was a question.

"Why not?" Smitty said.

Fanston decided to tell us: "Because, when we looked through that other apartment, we found something. I'll show you."

He led the way back through the window out to the fire escape and then to the girl's apartment. Over in a corner of the bedroom was a fine sprinkle of plaster dust on the floor near the baseboard.

Gabby was the one who got it first. He moved a mirror back out of the way. Behind it was a neat little hole in the plaster and the diaphragm of a dictograph.

That point established, we returned to the other apartment.

"The receiving end of the installation is in here," Fanston continued; "also, the bloody clothes are in here. You can figure what that means. Having put up that dictograph, with the receiving end in

this apartment, they're naturally due to come back to watch it—if you fellows haven't messed things up so that you've scared away the quarry we're after."

Suddenly I remembered something. Without waiting to explain my hunch, I hurried out of the room.

I walked down the long corridor, looking at numbers on the doors. I found the apartment I wanted down at the far end of the corridor. The place was dark and silent. The hallway held that peculiar clammy feel which clings to crowded apartment houses along toward morning. A dog yapped once, then quit.

I gently turned the doorknob. When I felt that the latch was free, I pushed tentatively against the door.

The door was jerked open from the inside. Before I could let loose, I was thrown off balance and came stumbling on into the room.

A man's voice said, "All right—you asked for this."

It was dark in the room, with just the faint hint of distant lights seeping through the windows.

They had fed me enough carrots and vitamins to improve my night vision and taught me enough about rough-and-tumble fighting in the dark, so that what came next didn't bother me at all. It was just like going through a training routine.

I knew a blackjack was swinging for my head somewhere in the

darkness. I sidestepped, felt a swish of air as something whizzed past where my head had been, saw a dark object in front of me, and, somewhat off balance, figured where his bread basket would be, and hit him where he was thickest.

I felt surprised muscles collapsing beneath the force of my blow, heard a "*whoosh*" as the breath went out of him.

Someone cursed behind me. A flame split the darkness wide open. I could feel the hot breath of burning gunpowder against my cheek. I never did hear the bullet crash. My ears were numbed by the sound, but I whirled and struck out with my left.

It was then the knee gave way. I went down in a heap. . . . But they'd taught me all about that in the Army, too. I caught the man's knees as I went down. He struck at my head in the dark with the gun barrel and missed it by a couple of inches. I grabbed for his wrists and didn't connect. He kicked me in the shin and broke loose.

There was a quarter-second of silence. I realized then he had enough light to show him where I was. He was going to shoot.

I flung myself into a quick roll, kicking as I came over. My heel grazed against his knee. A dog was barking frenziedly.

I heard running steps in the corridor. The beam of a flashlight danced around the opening of the

door. There were scrambling steps, someone barking an order, a back door opening, and stampeding feet running down a staircase.

The two officers went storming past me, following the beam of the flashlight. I saw Gabby's long arms raise the window, saw him slide matter-of-factly out to the edge of the sill, heard him say, "All right, boys. That'll be enough. Stick up your hands."

The windowpane above him split into fragments of glass as two bullets came through.

I saw Gabby's arm swing the automatic.

"You all right, Jay?" he asked.

I rolled over on my hands and knees and started getting up. The knee felt weak, the way a thumb feels when you've bent it all the way back and all the strength is gone out of it, but I could hobble along all right.

"Okay," I said.

I went into the bedroom. Before I found the light switch, I could see two long rolls of something stretched out on the bed. Then I found the light switch and clicked on illumination.

They were tied up in sheets, their lips taped shut. Two pair of eyes looked up at me—large, expressive dark eyes and big blue eyes.

I reached over and tried pulling off the tape from their lips. I held the side of Lorraine's cheek, got a good hold on the tape, and gave it a quick jerk.

"Hurt?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "Not much."

I went around the bed to Muriel, worked a corner loose, and then gave her the same treatment.

"You *would* have to do it the hard way!" she flared.

I started untying sheets.

From the outer room I heard Inspector Fanston saying in an odd voice, "Good Lord! How did you do it, shooting in the dark? Knocking the legs out from under them."

Gabby didn't even bother to answer the question. He said, "Listen, Inspector; this is purely civilian, see? We don't figure in it at all. We're just witnesses who happened to be in an apartment in the building. Here's a number. Call this number and make a report. They'll tell you what to do. . . . As far as you know, it's a gang of house-breakers that had headquarters here. You even keep the railroad angle out of it. . . . Get me?"

I waited, expecting to hear Fanston ask Gabby who the hell he thought he was. But, instead, Fanston's voice sounded meek and subdued. I knew then the shield in that leather case Gabby was carrying in his pocket was big stuff. The inspector said, "I get you. . . . Smitty, get out in the hallway and get those people back where they belong. Tell them there may be more shooting. And don't let anyone talk with the prisoners."

I heard the whir of a telephone,

and Inspector Fanston's voice saying, "Police Headquarters," then Muriel Comley saying, "Leave that sheet where it is. All I've got on underneath is underwear." Her eyes went past me to the doorway and softened. "Oh, hello, Gabby!"

Gabby said, "We can stay right here until things quiet down, and then you can go and—"

"Not in *this* room," Lorraine said.

"What's the matter with it?" Gabby asked.

I looked at Lorraine's eyes, got up and walked across to the closet door, opened it a few inches, and then hastily pushed it shut.

Gabby took one look at my face, and knew the answer.

"Oh, Fanston," he said in a low voice, "the body you're looking for is in here."

Over a breakfast of ham, eggs, and coffee, Gabby told us as much as he ever told us.

"For a long time," he said, "we'd been running into a peculiar type of trouble. Machinery would be tested and double-tested. It would be put aboard freight cars, shipped to various army camps, and tested when it got there. Everything would be all right, but after a while, usually under the stress of combat, the machinery would suddenly go haywire. Part of it we found was due to the old, familiar sabotage of putting a little acid on critical metal parts, and then carefully covering

up the slight discoloration. But the other part of it had us completely baffled. A machine would get into combat and suddenly fail. Later on, we'd post-mortem, and find sugar had been introduced into the gasoline. You know what *that* does to an internal combustion motor.

"After a while we found out that all the machinery with which we had this trouble had come through the yards in this city, but that in itself didn't seem to mean anything, because the machinery was tested on arrival at destination and everything was all right. But we still kept coming back to that peculiar coincidence that our troubles came with stuff that went through these freight yards.

"I'd had some railroad experience, and I was sent up here to check the whole situation. In the meantime, Carl Greester was working on the hump, and he stumbled onto what was going on. The enemy agents had duplicate tags slightly larger than the regular numbered tags which went on the cars as they came through the switch. By putting on those phony numbers they'd have the cars they wanted switched down to a siding where they had the opportunity to do their work. And it didn't take long.

"After the cars had been entered and sabotaged they'd be resealed, the phony numbers taken off, a couple of dummy cars added, and a switch engine sent down to pick up the cut and redistribute it.

"When Greester found out what was happening, he didn't go to the FBI. He went to the men who were mixed up in it. They bought his silence for seven thousand five hundred dollars. But Greester was afraid to take a bribe in the ordinary manner, and they weren't foolish enough to just park seven thousand five hundred somewhere and go away and leave it for him to pick up. Greester kept insisting that the money be given to him under such circumstances that if there was a double-cross, the FBI couldn't claim he had accepted a bribe.

"Finally they agreed that Greester would send a suit out to be cleaned. When that suit came back from the cleaners it was to be given to the clerk to hang up in Greester's apartment. The bribe money would be in the inside pocket. In that way, if anyone suspected what was happening, Greester could have a perfect alibi. He'd sent his suit to the cleaners. The cleaner returned the suit to the clerk while Greester was on duty at the yards.

"But when the go-between picked up the suit at the cleaners, planted the seventy-five hundred bucks in the pocket, and handed the suit to the desk, he either got mixed up on the numbers, or the clerk did. No names were mentioned, merely apartment numbers. The suit went to two-eighteen instead of two-eighty-one.

"Greester came home, looked for the suit and the bribe money. No

suit, no bribe. He asked the clerk if anything had been left for him at the desk. The clerk said no. The gang knew the suit had been delivered. They naturally thought the clerk had frisked it and got the dough.

"They got the things straightened out, finally. The clerk was a little nincompoop who was always getting figures mixed up. They decided he must have delivered the suit to the wrong apartment. One of the men got into Muriel's apartment with a passkey, found the suit, all right; but the money was gone. He was in there when Lorraine came in, and he had an idea the money might have found its way into Muriel's purse. That's why he was so interested in the telephone conversation."

"And the clerk?" I asked.

"The clerk kept thinking over Greester's questions, finally remembered about the suit, and wondered if he hadn't put it in two-eighteen instead of two-eighty-one. He went up to two-eighteen, let himself in with a passkey, and found a man boring holes in the wall and installing a dictograph. . . . We know what happened to the clerk."

"Why the dictograph?" I asked.

"Don't you see? They didn't know whether Muriel was a government agent and they were leading with their chins, or whether it was just a mix-up. Naturally, clubbing the clerk hadn't entered into

their plans. They had to get rid of the body."

"They knew we'd discovered that body?" I asked.

"Sure, they did. They were on the other end of the dictograph when we stumbled on it before they'd had a chance to remove it. They evidently waited a while to see if we were going to report it. When they found out we weren't, they tried to whisk it away."

"But Greester must have thrown in with them," I said. "His apartment was two-eighty-one, and—"

"He didn't throw in with them," Gabby said. "Greester tried to play smart. It was unfortunate that he did."

"You mean—?"

"The police discovered his body about daylight this morning, when one of the gang confessed."

"But," Muriel said, "Carl Greester seemed so nice. He told me that a man who owed my husband some money was working down at the switchyards on a night shift, that if I'd come down and see him, I could arrange to get the balance of the money that was due under my property settlement with my husband. He wrote out where I was to meet him shortly after midnight, I . . . Oh, I guess I see now."

Gabby said, "He found out about this man and tipped you off just as a favor, but all the time he was playing with this personal dynamite. He thought he was being

smart. All he was doing was signing his own death warrant."

"So they took over Greester's apartment?" I asked.

"Sure. It was bad enough finding Greester's suit in the girl's apartment. But when the girls came down to the switchyard to join Greester around midnight, they became suspicious. They made an excuse to grab Muriel, jerk her out of the way of a freight car, and frisk her purse while they were doing it. As soon as they found out that purse contained seventy-five hundred dollars, the girls were on the spot. Then you and I put in our two-bits worth."

"What's become of the money?" I asked.

"The money," Gabby said, "is in the hands of Uncle Sam. Three men were placed under arrest for tampering with the seals of freight cars. One of them started talking. He's talked enough so Fanston can pin the murder of the clerk and Carl Greester on the two other men. And the third, who turned state's evidence, will get life as an accessory after the fact."

"How about the man who owed my husband money?" Muriel asked. "Is he one of them?"

Gabby shook his head. "I think you're okay on that. His name is Gulliver. He works under Bob Cuttering. Cuttering's a grouch-face who is pretty much over-worked, but he's a good egg just the same."

I said, "I don't see why this man in the bedroom didn't stick me up for Muriel's purse, and—"

"Because you *said* you didn't have it with you. Lorraine could tell, from the way you were holding your left arm against your body, that you did have it. The man in the bedroom could only hear what you'd said. He couldn't see. That's why Lorraine was able to get out of the apartment—talking as though she were slamming the door indignantly on her visitor, but actually slamming herself on the other side of it."

"And Muriel was taken out of the bedroom window while you were in the living-room?"

Gabby nodded.

Lorraine said, "I was never so frightened in my life. While I was waiting down there on the stairs, a man poked the muzzle of a gun into my back and marched me down the corridor."

"The dog was a sort of watchman?" I asked.

Gabby nodded. "When they moved into Greester's apartment, they took the dog with 'em. The dog had been trained on one of those inaudible whistles. Whenever he heard it, he'd bark and try to get out. Whenever anyone entered the place that might make trouble, a guy posted outside would blow the whistle, and the dog would bark. The dog had also been taught to give warning when anyone came near the apartment."

"Well," I said, "I guess that winds up the case."

"Of course," Gabby said, "the colonel insists that he's going to hold us responsible to see nothing happens to these girls—my buddy and me. I told the colonel it might be a little embarrassing. But you know the colonel; he just barked into the telephone, 'Keep those two girls lined up. I don't want them going out with anyone except you two!'"

"You mean we can't have any other dates?" Muriel demanded.

"Exactly," Gabby said sternly. "Those are orders direct from the colonel."

Muriel lowered her lashes. "Well," she conceded, "if it's for my country."

I looked at Lorraine.

She said, "He's got the idea now, Gabby, so you can take your foot away. It's *my* toe you're on."

"What are you two talking about?" Muriel demanded.

"Our duty to our government," Lorraine said self-righteously.



E. Nesbit

No. 17

E. Nesbit's wonderful tales about well-bred English children were greatly admired by such celebrities as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and in Miss Nesbit's declining years, Noel Coward; and on this side of the Atlantic her devoted followers included Christopher Morley, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and William Rose Benét. But not all of E. Nesbit's "bedtime stories" were for children . . .

I YAWNED. I COULD NOT HELP IT. But the flat, inexorable voice went on. "Speaking from the journalistic point of view—I may tell you, gentlemen, that I once occupied the position of advertisement editor to the *Bradford Woollen Goods Journal*—and speaking from that point of view, I hold the opinion that all the best ghost stories have been written over and over again; and if I were to leave the road and return to a literary career I should never be led away by ghosts. Realism's what's wanted nowadays, if you want to be up-to-date."

The large commercial paused for breath.

"You never can tell with the public," said the lean, elderly traveler; "it's like in the fancy business. You never know how it's going to be. Whether it's a clockwork ostrich or Sometite silk or a particular shape of shaded-glass novelty or a tobacco

box got up to look like a raw chop, you never know your luck."

"That depends on who you are," said the dapper man in the corner by the fire. "If you've got the right push about you, you can make a thing go, whether it's a clockwork kitten or imitation meat, and with stories, I take it, it's just the same—realism or ghost stories. But the best ghost story would be the real-est one."

The large commercial had got his breath.

"I don't believe in ghost stories, myself," he was saying with earnest dullness; "but there was rather a queer thing happened to a second cousin of an aunt of mine by marriage—a very sensible woman with no nonsense about her. And the soul of truth and honor. I shouldn't have believed it if she had been one of your flighty, fanciful sort."

"Don't tell us the story," said the melancholy man who traveled in

hardware; "you'll make us afraid to go to bed."

The well-meant effort failed. The large commercial went on, as I had known he would; his words overflowed his mouth, as his person overflowed his chair. I turned my mind to my own affairs, coming back to the commercial room in time to hear the summing up.

"The doors were all locked, and she was quite certain she saw a tall, white figure glide past her and vanish. I wouldn't have believed it if—" And so on *da capo*, from "if she hadn't been the second cousin" to the "soul of truth and honor."

"Very good story," said the smart little man by the fire. He was a traveler, as the rest of us were; his presence in the room told us that much. He had been rather silent during dinner, and afterwards, while the red curtains were being drawn and the red and black cloth laid between the glasses and the decanters and the mahogany, he had quietly taken the best chair in the warmest corner.

"Very good story," he said; "but it's not what I call realism. You don't tell us half enough, sir. You don't say when it happened or where, or the time of year, or what color your aunt's second cousin's hair was. Nor yet you don't tell us what it was she saw, nor what the room was like where she saw it, nor why she saw it, nor what happened afterwards. And I shouldn't like to breathe a word against anybody's

aunt's by marriage cousin, first or second, but I must say I like a story about what a man's seen *himself*."

"So do I," the large commercial snorted, "when I hear it."

"But," said the rabbit-faced man, "we know nowadays, what with the advance of science and all that sort of thing, we know there aren't any such things as ghosts. They're hallucinations; that's what they are."

"Don't seem to matter what you call them," the dapper one urged. "If you see a thing that looks as real as you do yourself, a thing that makes your blood run cold and turns you sick and silly with fear—well, call it ghost, or call it hallucination, or call it Tommy Dodd; it isn't the *name* that matters."

The elderly commercial coughed and said, "You might call it another name. You might call it—"

"No, you mightn't," said the little man, briskly; "not when the man it happened to had been a teetotal Bond of Joy for five years and is to this day."

"Why don't you tell us the story?" I asked.

"I might be willing," he said, "if the rest of the company were agreeable. Only I warn you it's not that sort-of-a-kind-of-a-somebody-fancied-they-saw-a-sort-of-a-something-sort of a story. No, sir. Everything I'm going to tell you is plain and straightforward and as clear as a timetable. But I don't like telling it, especially to people who don't believe in ghosts."

Several of us said we did believe in ghosts. The heavy man snorted and looked at his watch. And the man in the best chair began.

"Turn the gas down a bit, will you? Thanks. Did any of you know Herbert Hatteras? He was on this road a good many years. No? Well, never mind. He was a good chap, I believe, with good teeth and a black whisker. But I didn't know him myself. He was before my time. Well, this that I'm going to tell you about happened at a certain commercial hotel. I'm not going to give it a name, because that sort of thing gets about, and in every other respect it's a good house and reasonable, and we all have our living to get. It was just a good ordinary old-fashioned commercial hotel, as it might be this. And I've often used it since, though they've never put me in that room again. Perhaps they shut it up.

"Well, the beginning of it was, I came across an old schoolfellow; in Boulter's Lock one Sunday it was, I remember. Jones was his name, Ted Jones. We both had canoes. We had tea at Marlow, and we got talking about this and that and old times and old mates; and do you remember Jim, and what's become of Tom, and so on. Oh, you know. And I happened to ask after his brother, Fred by name. And Ted turned pale and almost dropped his cup, and he said, 'You don't mean to say you haven't heard?' 'No; what?' I said.

"'It was horrible,' he said. 'They wired for me, and I saw him afterwards. Whether he'd done it himself or not, nobody knows; but they'd found him lying on the floor with his throat cut.' No cause could be assigned for the rash act, Ted told me. I asked him where it had happened, and he told me the name of this hotel—I'm not going to name it. And when I'd sympathized with him and drawn him out about old times and poor old Fred being such a good old sort and all that, I asked him what the room was like. I always like to know what the places look like where things happen.

"No, there wasn't anything specially rum about the room, only that it had a French bed with red curtains in a sort of alcove; and a large mahogany wardrobe as big as a hearse, with a glass door; and, instead of a swing-glass, a carved, black-framed glass screwed up against the wall between the windows, and a picture of 'Belshazzar's Feast' over the mantelpiece. I beg your pardon?" He stopped, for the heavy commercial had opened his mouth and shut it again.

"I thought you were going to say something," the dapper man went on. "Well, we talked about other things and parted, and I thought no more about it till business brought me to—but I'd better not name the town either—and I found my firm had marked this very hotel—where poor Fred had met his

death, you know—for me to put up at. And I had to put up there too, because of their addressing everything to me there. And, anyhow, I expect I should have gone there out of curiosity.

"No. I didn't believe in ghosts in those days. I was like you, sir." He nodded amiably to the large commercial.

"The house was very full, and we were quite a large party in the room—very pleasant company, as it might be tonight; and we got talking of ghosts—just as it might be us. And there was a chap in glasses, sitting just over there, I remember—an old hand on the road, he was—and he said, just as it might be any of you, 'I don't believe in ghosts, but I wouldn't care to sleep in Number Seventeen, for all that'; and, of course, we asked him why. 'Because,' said he, very short, 'that's why.'

"But when we'd persuaded him a bit, he told us.

"'Because that's the room where chaps cut their throats,' he said. 'There was a chap called Bert Hatteras began it. They found him weltering in his gore. And since then every man that's slept there's been found with his throat cut.'

"I asked him how many had slept there. 'Well, only two beside the first,' he said; 'they shut it up then. 'Oh, did they?' said I. 'Well, they've opened it again. Number Seventeen's my room!'

"'But you aren't going to *sleep*

in it?' one of them said. And I explained that I didn't pay for a bedroom to keep awake in.

"'I suppose it's press of business has made them open it up again,' the chap in spectacles said. 'It's a very mysterious affair. There's some secret horror about that room that we don't understand,' he said, 'and I'll tell you another queer thing. Every one of those poor chaps was a commercial gentleman. That's what I don't like about it. There was Bert Hatteras—he was the first, and a chap called Jones—Frederick Jones, and then Donald Overshaw—a Scotchman he was.'

"'Well, we sat there and talked a bit, and if I hadn't been a Bond of Joy, I don't know that I mightn't have exceeded, gentlemen—yes, positively exceeded; for the more I thought about it, the less I liked the thought of Number Seventeen. I hadn't noticed the room particularly, except to see that the furniture had been changed since poor Fred's time. So I just slipped out, by and by, and I went out to the little glass case under the arch where the room-clerk sits—just like here, the hotel was—and I said:

"'Look here, sir; haven't you another room empty except seventeen?'

"'No,' he said; 'I don't think so.'

"'Then what's that?' I said, and pointed to a key hanging on the board, the only one left.

"'Oh,' he said, 'that's sixteen.'

"'Anyone in sixteen?' I said. 'Is it a comfortable room?'"

"'No,' said he. 'Yes; quite comfortable. It's next-door to yours—much the same class of room.'"

"'Then I'll have sixteen, if you've no objection,' I said.

"When I went up to bed I locked my door, and, though I didn't believe in ghosts, I wished seventeen wasn't next door to me, and I wished there wasn't a door between the two rooms, though the door was locked right enough and the key on my side. I'd only got the one candle besides the two on the dressing-table, which I hadn't lighted; and I got my collar and tie off before I noticed that the furniture in my new room was the furniture out of Number Seventeen; French bed with red curtains, mahogany wardrobe as big as a hearse, and the carved mirror over the dressing-table between the two windows, and "Belshazzar's Feast" over the mantelpiece. So that, though I'd not got the *room* where the commercial gentlemen had cut their throats, I'd got the *furniture* out of it.

"It was a silly thing to do—but we're all friends here and I don't mind owning up—I looked under the bed and I looked inside the hearse-wardrobe and I looked in a sort of narrow cupboard there was, where a body could have stood upright—"

"A body?" I repeated.

"A man, I mean. You see, it

seemed to me that either those poor chaps had been murdered by someone who hid himself in Number Seventeen to do it, or else there was something there that frightened them into cutting their throats; and upon my soul, I can't tell you which idea I liked least!"

He paused, and filled his pipe very deliberately. "Go on," someone said.

"Now, you'll observe," he said, "that all I've told you up to the time of my going to bed that night's just hearsay. So I don't ask you to believe it—though the three coroners' inquests would be enough to stagger most chaps, I should say. Still, what I'm going to tell you now's *my* part of the story—what happened to me."

He paused again, holding the pipe in his hand, unlighted.

There was a silence, which I broke.

"Well, what *did* happen?" I asked.

"I had a bit of a struggle with myself," he said. "I reminded myself it was not that room, but the next one that it had happened in. I smoked a pipe or two and read the morning paper, advertisements and all. And at last I went to bed. I left the candle burning, though, I own that."

"Did you sleep?" I asked.

"Yes. I slept. Sound as a top. I was awakened by a soft tapping on my door. I sat up. I don't think I've ever been so frightened in my

life. But I made myself say, 'Who's there?' in a whisper. Heaven knows I never expected anyone to answer. The candle had gone out and it was pitch-dark. There was a quiet murmur and a shuffling sound outside. And no one answered. I tell you I hadn't expected anyone to. But I cleared my throat and cried out, 'Who's there?' in a real out-loud voice. And 'Me, sir,' said a voice. 'Shaving water; six o'clock, sir.'

"It was the chambermaid."

A movement of relief ran round our circle.

"I don't think much of your story," said the large commercial.

"You haven't heard it yet," said the story-teller, dryly. "It was six o'clock on a winter's morning, and pitch-dark. My train went at seven. I got up and began to dress. My one candle wasn't much use. I lighted the two on the dressing-table to see to shave by. There wasn't any shaving water outside my door, after all. And the passage was as black as a coal-hole. So I started to shave with cold water; one has to sometimes, you know. I'd gone over my face and I was just going lightly round under my chin, when I saw something move in the looking-glass. I mean something that moved was reflected in the looking-glass. The big door of the wardrobe had swung open, and by a sort of double reflection I could see the French bed with the red curtains. On the edge of it sat

a man in his shirt and trousers—a man with black hair and whiskers; with the most awful look of despair and fear on his face that I've ever seen or dreamed of. I stood paralyzed, watching him in the mirror. I could not have turned round to save my life. Suddenly he laughed. It was a horrid, silent laugh, and showed all his teeth. They were very white and even. And the next moment he had cut his throat from ear to ear, there before my eyes. Did you ever see a man cut his throat?"

The story-teller had laid down his pipe, and he passed his hand over his face before he went on.

"When I could look round I did. There was no one in the room. The bed was as white as ever. Well, that's all," he said, abruptly, "except that now, of course, I understood how these poor chaps had come by their deaths. They'd all seen this horror—the ghost of the first poor chap, I suppose—Bert Hatteras, you know; and with the shock their hands must have slipped and their throats got cut before they could stop themselves. Oh! By the way, when I looked at my watch it was two o'clock; there hadn't been any chambermaid at all. I must have dreamed that. But I didn't dream the other. Oh! And one thing more. It was the same room. They hadn't changed the room, they'd only changed the number. *It was the same room!*"

"Look here," said the heavy

man; "the room you've been talking about. My room's sixteen. And it's got that same furniture in it as what you describe, and the same picture and all."

"Oh, has it?" said the story-teller. "I'm sorry. But the cat's out of the bag now, and it can't be helped. Yes, it *was* this house I was speaking of. I suppose they've opened the room again. But you don't believe in ghosts; *you'll* be all right."

"Yes," said the heavy man, and presently got up and left the room.

"He's gone to see if he can get his room changed. You see if he hasn't," said the rabbit-faced man.

The heavy man came back and settled into his chair.

"I could do with a drink," he said.

"I'll stand some punch, gentlemen, if you'll allow me," said our dapper story-teller. "I rather pride myself on my punch. I'll step out to the bar and get what I need for it."

"I thought he said he was a teetotaler," said the heavy traveler

when he had gone. And then our voices buzzed like a hive of bees. When our story-teller came in again we turned on him—half a dozen of us at once.

"One at a time," he said, gently.

"We want to know," I said, "how it was—if seeing that ghost made all those chaps cut their throats by startling them when they were shaving—how was it *you* didn't cut *your* throat when you saw it?"

"I should have," he answered, gravely, "without the slightest doubt—I should have cut my throat, only," he glanced at our heavy friend, "I always shave with a safety razor. I travel in them," he added, slowly, and bisected a lemon.

"But—but," said the large man, when he could speak through our uproar, "I've given up my room."

"Yes," said the dapper man, squeezing the lemon; "I've just had my things moved into it. It's the best room in the house. I always think it worthwhile to take a little pains to secure it."

T. S. Stribling

A Daylight Adventure

There are certain things in the world which come naturally and inevitably in pairs—lovebirds, shoes, candlesticks, bacon and eggs. In the same way there are certain stories which have a natural and inevitable affinity . . . In this superb story by Pulitzer Prize winner T. S. Stribling, Professor Poggioli and his "Watson" stop over for lunch in a small Tennessee town. In the short time of a sandwich interlude, Poggioli investigates a murder mystery, prevents a miscarriage of justice, and teaches a lesson in mass psychology and civilized behavior . . .

THE FOLLOWING NOTES CONCERNING Mrs. Cordy Cancy were not made at the time of her alleged murder of her husband, James Cancy. Worse than that, they were not taken even at the time of her trial, but seven or eight months later at the perfectly hopeless date when Sheriff Matheny of Lanesburg, Tennessee, was in the act of removing his prisoner from the county jail to the state penitentiary in Nashville.

Such a lapse of time naturally gave neither Professor Henry Poggioli nor the writer opportunity to develop those clues, fingerprints, bullet wounds, and psychological analyses which usually enliven the story of any crime.

Our misfortune was that we motored into Lanesburg only a few minutes before Sheriff Matheny was due to motor out of the village

with his prisoner. And even then we knew nothing whatever of the affair. We simply had stopped for lunch at the Monarch café in Courthouse Square, and we had to wait a few minutes to get stools at the counter. Finally, two men vacated their places. As Poggioli sat down, he found a copy of an old local newspaper stuck between the paper-napkin case and a ketchup bottle. He unfolded it and began reading. As he became absorbed almost at once in its contents, I was sure he had found a murder story, because that is about all the professor ever reads.

I myself take no interest in murders. I have always personally considered them deplorable rather than entertaining. The fact that I make my living writing accounts of Professor Poggioli's criminological investigations, I consider simply

as an occupational hazard and hardship.

The square outside of our café was crowded with people and filled with movement and noise. In the midst of this general racket I heard the voice of some revivalist preacher booming out through a loudspeaker, asking the Lord to save Sister Cordy Cancy from a sinner's doom, and then he added the rather unconventional phrase that Sister Cordy was not the "right" sinner but was an innocent woman, or nearly so.

That of course was faintly puzzling—why a minister should broadcast such a remark about one of his penitents. Usually the Tennessee hill preacher makes his converts out to be very bad persons indeed, and strongly in need of grace, which I suppose most of us really are. Now to hear one woman mentioned in a prayer as "nearly innocent" was a sharp break from the usual.

I suppose Poggioli also caught the name subconsciously, for he looked up suddenly and asked me if the name "Cancy" had been called. I told him yes, and repeated what I had just heard over the megaphone.

The criminologist made some sort of silent calculation, then said, "Evidently Mrs. Cancy has had her baby and the sheriff is starting with her to the penitentiary in Nashville."

I inquired into the matter. Pog-

gioli tapped his paper. "Just been reading a stenographic account of the woman's trial which took place here in Lanesburg a little over seven months ago. She was sentenced to life imprisonment, but she was pregnant at the time, so the judge ruled that she should remain here in Lanesburg jail until the baby was born and then be transferred to the state penitentiary in Nashville. So I suppose by this noise that the baby has arrived and the mother is on her way to prison."

Just as my companion explained this the preacher's voice boomed out, "Oh, Lord, do something to save Sister Cordy! Sheriff Matheny's fixin' to start with her to Nashville. Work a miracle, Oh, Lord, and convince him she is innocent. You kain't desert her, Lord, when she put all her faith an' trust in You. She done a small crime as You well know, but done it with a pyure heart and for Yore sake. So come down in Yore power an' stop the sheriff and save an innocent woman from an unjust sentence. Amen." Then in an aside which was still audible over the megaphone, "Sheriff Matheny, give us five minutes more. He's bound to send Sister Cordy aid in the next five minutes."

Now I myself am a Tennessean, and I knew how natural it was for a hill-country revivalist to want some special favor from the Lord, and to want it at once; but I had never before heard one ask the res-

cue of a prisoner on her way to Nashville. I turned to Poggioli and said, "The minister admits the woman has committed some smaller crime. What was that?"

"Forgery," he replied. "She forged her husband's will in favor of herself, then applied the proceeds to build a new roof on the Leatherwood church. That's part of the court record."

"And what's the other crime—the one she claims to be innocent of?"

"The murder of her husband, Jim Cancy. She not only claims to be innocent, she really is. The testimony in the trial proved that beyond a doubt."

I was shocked. "Then why did the judge condemn . . ."

The criminologist drew down his lips. "Because the proof of her innocence is psychological. Naturally, that lay beyond the comprehension of the jury, and the judge too, as far as that goes."

I stared at my companion. "Can you prove her innocence, now, at this late date?"

"Certainly, if this paper has printed the court reporter's notes correctly, and I'm sure it has."

"Why, this is the most amazing thing I ever heard of—hitting in like this!"

"What do you mean 'hitting in like this'?"

"Good heavens, don't you see? Just as the sheriff is starting off with an innocent woman, just as

the preacher is asking the Lord to send down some power to save her, here you come along at exactly the right moment. You know she is innocent and can prove it!"

Poggioli gave the dry smile of a scientific man. "Oh, I see. You think my coming here is providential."

"Certainly. What else is there to think?"

"I regret to disillusion you, but it is not. It couldn't be. It is nothing more than an extraordinary coincidence—and I can prove that, too." With this my friend returned to his paper.

This left me frankly in a nervous state. It seemed to me we ought to do something for the woman outside. I looked at the man sitting next to us at the counter. He nodded his head sidewise at Poggioli. "He don't live around here, does he?"

I said he didn't.

"If he don't live here, how does he know what's happened in these parts?"

"You heard him say he read it in the paper."

"He didn't do no such thing. I watched him. He didn't read that paper a tall, he jest turned through it, like I would a picture book."

I told him that was Poggioli's way of reading. It is called sight-reading—just a look and he knew it.

The hill man shook his head, "Naw, Mister, I know better'n

that. I've watched hundreds of men read that paper sence it's laid thar on the counter, and the fassrest one tuk a hour an twelve minutes to git through."

I nodded. I was not interested, so I said, "I daresay that's true."

"Of course hit's so," he drawled truculently, "ever'thing I say is so."

"I'm not doubting your word," I placated, "it is you who are doubting mine. You see I know my friend's ability at sight-reading."

This silenced him for a few moments, then he said shrewdly, "Looky here, if he gits what he knows out'n that paper, how come him to say Cordy Cancy is innocent when the paper says she's guilty?"

"Because the judgment in the paper doesn't agree with the evidence it presents. My friend has gone over the evidence and has judged for himself that the woman is guilty of forgery but innocent of murder."

This gave the hill man pause. A certain expression came into his leathery face. "He's a detectif, ain't he?"

"Well, not exactly. He used to be a teacher in the Ohio State University, and he taught detectives how to detect."

"Mm—mm. Who hard [hired] him to come hyar?"

"Nobody," I said, "he just dropped in by chance."

"Chanst, huh? You expeck me to b'leve that?"

"Yes, I must say I do."

"Well, jest look at it frum my

stan'point—him comin' hyar the very minnit the preacher is prayin' fer he'p and the shurrf startin' with her to the penitentiary—a great detectif like him jest drap in by chanst. Do you expeck me to b'leve that?"

All this was delivered with the greatest heat and my seat-mate seemed to hold me personally responsible for the situation.

"Well, what do you believe?" I asked in an amiable tone which gave him permission to believe anything he wanted to and no hard feelings.

"Why, jess what I said. I b'leve he wuz hard."

His suspicion of Poggioli, who would never accept a penny for his criminological researches, amused me. "Well, that's your privilege, but if it would strengthen your faith in me I will say that to the best of my knowledge and belief Professor Henry Poggioli's arrival in Lanesburg, Tennessee, on the eve of Mrs. Cordy Cancy's committal to the Nashville penitentiary, was a coincidence, a whole coincidence, and nothing but a coincidence, so help me, John Doe."

I had hoped to lighten my companion's dour mood, but he arose gloomily from his stool.

"I hope the Lord forgives you fer mawkin' His holy words."

"They are not the Lord's holy words," I reminded him, "they're the sheriff's words when he swears in a witness."

"Anyway, you tuk His name in vain when you said 'em."

"Didn't mention His name, sir. I said 'John Doe.'"

"Anyway, Brother," he continued in his menacing drawl, "you shore spoke with lightness. The Bible warns you against speakin' with lightness—you kain't git aroun' that." With this he took himself out of the café, scraping his feet in the doorway as a symbol of shaking my dust from his shoes.

As I watched the saturnine fellow go, Poggioli turned from his paper.

"Poses quite a riddle, doesn't he?"

"Not for me," I said. "I was born here in the hills."

"You understand him?"

"I think so."

"You didn't observe any more precise and concrete contradiction about him?"

I tried to think of some simple contradiction in the man, something plain. I knew when Poggioli pointed it out it would be very obvious, but nothing came to my mind. I asked him what he saw.

"Two quite contradictory reactions: he was disturbed about my being a detective and about your near profanity."

"I am afraid I don't quite see what you mean."

"I'll make it simpler. He evidently was a deacon in some church."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he reproved the 'light-

ness' of your language. The scriptures instruct deacons to reprove the faults of the brethren, and lightness of language is one of them. So he was probably a deacon."

"All right, say he was. What does that contradict?"

"His disturbance over my being a detective. Deacons are supposed to ally themselves with law and order."

I laughed. "You don't know your Tennessee hill deacons. That contradiction in them is historical. Their ancestors came here before the Revolution to worship God as they pleased and escape the excise tax. They have been for the Lord and against the law ever since."

At this point another man hurried from the square into the Monarch café. I noted the hurry because under ordinary circumstances hill men never hurry, not even in the rain. He glanced up and down the counter, immediately came to my companion, and lifted a hand. "Excuse me, Brother, but you're not a preacher?"

"No, I'm not," said my companion.

"Then you are the detective that was sent. Will you come with me?"

"Just what do you mean by 'sent'?" asked the criminologist.

"Why the Lord sent you," explained the man hurriedly but earnestly. "Brother Johnson was jest prayin' to the Lord to send somebody to prove Sister Cordy Cancy innocent and keep her from going

to the pen. Jim Phipps heard you-all talkin' an' hurried out an' told us there was a detectif in here. So He's bound to have sent ye."

Poggioli reflected. "I am sure I can prove the woman innocent—from the evidence printed in this paper. But what good will that do, when the trial is over and the woman already sentenced?"

"Brother," said the countryman, "if the Lord started this work, don't you reckon He can go on an' finish it?"

"Look here, Poggioli," I put in, "we're here for some reason or other."

"Yes, by pure chance, by accident," snapped the psychologist. "Our presence has no more relation to this woman than . . ."

He was looking for a simile when I interrupted, "If you know she is innocent don't you think it your duty to—"

The psychologist stopped me with his hand and his expression. "I believe I do owe a duty . . . yes . . . yes, I owe a duty. I'll go do what I can."

The man who came for him was most grateful; so were all the people in the café, for they had overheard the conversation. Everybody was delighted except me. I didn't like Poggioli's tone, or the expression on his face. I wondered what he really was going to do.

Well, by the time we got out of the restaurant everybody in the square seemed to know who we

were. There was a great commotion. The preacher's prayer for help had been answered instantly. It was a miracle.

The sound-truck which had been booming stood in front of the county jail on the south side of the square. Beside the truck was the sheriff's car with the woman prisoner handcuffed in the back seat. Near the car stood another woman holding a young baby in her arms. This infant, I gathered, was the prisoner's child, and would be left behind in the Lanesburg jail while its mother went on to the penitentiary in Nashville. The crowd naturally was in sympathy with the woman and expected us immediately to deliver her from her troubles. I heard one of the men say as we pushed forward, "That heavy man's the detective and that slim 'un's his stooge; he writes down what the big 'un does."

Frankly, I was moved by the situation, and I was most uneasy about the outcome. I asked Poggioli just what he meant to do.

He glanced at me as we walked. "Cure them of an illusion."

"Just what do you mean—cure them of an . . ."

He nodded at the crowd around us. "I will prove to these people the woman is innocent, but at the same time show that my proof can be of no benefit to the prisoner. This ought to convince the crowd that providence had nothing to do with the matter, and it ought to make

them, as a group, a little more rationalistic and matter-of-fact. That is what I consider it my duty to do."

His whole plan appeared cruel to me. I said, "Well, thank goodness, you won't be able to do that in five minutes, and the sheriff gave them only that much more time before he starts out."

My hope to avoid Poggioli's demonstration was quashed almost at once. I saw the sheriff, a little man, climb out of his car, walk across to the sound-truck, and take the microphone from the minister. Then I heard the sheriff's voice boom out.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I understand there really is help on the way for Mrs. Cancy. Whether it is miraculous help or jest human help, I don't know. But anyway I'm extendin' Mrs. Cancy's time to prove her innocence one more hour before we start to Nashville."

A roar of approval arose at this. The minister in the truck then took over the loudspeaker, "Brothers and Sisters," he began in his more solemn drawl, "they ain't one ounce of doubt in my soul as to who sent this good man. I'll introduce him to you. He is Dr. Henry Poggioli, the great detective some of you have read about in the magazines. The Lord has miraculously sent Dr. Poggioli to clear Sister Cordy Cancy from her troubles. And now I'll introduce Sister Cordy to Dr. Poggioli. Doctor, Sister

Cordy don't claim complete innocence, but she's a mighty good woman. She did, however, forge her husband's will by takin' a carbon paper and some of his old love letters and tracin' out a will, letter by letter. She sees now that was wrong, but she was workin' for the glory of the Lord when she done it."

Shouts of approval here—"Glory be!" "Save her, Lord!" and so forth. The divine continued, "Jim Cancy, her husband, was a mawker and a scoffer. He wouldn't contribute a cent to the Lord's cause nor bend his knee in prayer. So Sister Cordy forged his will for religious ends. Now I guess the Lord knew Jim was goin' to git killed. But Sister Cordy didn't have a thing in the world to do with that. He jest got killed. And you all know what she done with his money—put a new roof on the Leatherwood churchhouse. Save her, Oh, Lord, from the penitentiary!" (Another uproar of hope and sympathy here) "And Brothers and Sisters, look how she acted in the trial, when suspicion fell on her for Jim's murder. She didn't spend one cent o' that money for a lawyer. She said it wasn't hers to spend, it was the Lord's and He would save her. She said she didn't need no lawyer on earth when she had one in Heaven. She said He would send her aid. And now, praise His name, He has sent it here at this eleventh hour." Again he was inter-

rupted by shouts and applause. When a semi-silence was restored, he said, "Dr. Poggioli, you can now prove Sister Cordy innocent of her husband's murder and set her free."

In the renewed uproar the minister solemnly handed the microphone down to Poggioli on the ground. I have seldom been more nervous about any event in Poggioli's eventful career. I didn't suppose he would be in any actual danger from the irate hill people when they found out what he was trying to do, but on the other hand a mob can be formed in the South in about three minutes. And they are likely to do anything—ride a man out of town on a rail, tar and feather him, give him a switching, depending on how annoyed they are. Poggioli never lived in the South, he had no idea what he was tampering with.

He began, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have little to say. I have just read the report of Mrs. Cancy's trial in your county paper. From it I have drawn absolute proof of her innocence of her husband's murder, but unfortunately that proof can be of no benefit to her."

Cries of "Why won't it?" "What's the matter with it?" "What makes you talk like that?"

"Because, my friends, of a legal technicality. If I could produce new evidence the trial judge could reopen her case and acquit Mrs. Cancy. But a reinterpretation of

old evidence is not a legal ground for a rehearing. All I can do now is to demonstrate to you from the evidence printed in your county paper that Mrs. Cancy is innocent of murder, but still she must go on with the Sheriff to the penitentiary in Nashville."

Despair filled the square; there arose outcries, pleas, oaths. The revivalist quashed this. He caught up his microphone and thundered, "Oh, ye of little faith, don't you see Sister Cordy's salvation is at hand? Do you think the Lord would send a detectif here when it wouldn't do no good? I'm as shore of victory as I'm standin' here. Brother Poggioli, go on talkin' with a good heart!"

The irony of the situation stabbed me: for Poggioli to intend a purely materialistic solution to the situation, and the minister who had besought his aid to hope for a miracle. It really was ironic. Fortunately, no one knew of this inner conflict except me or there would have been a swift outbreak of public indignation. The scientist began his proof:

"Ladies and gentlemen, your minister has recalled to your memory how Mrs. Cordy Cancy forged her husband's will by tracing each letter of it with a carbon paper from a package of her husband's old love letters. But he did not mention the fact that after she did this—after she had underscored and overscored these letters and made them the plainest and most

conclusive proof of her forgery—she still kept those love letters! She did not destroy them. She put them in a trunk whose key was lost, and kept them in the family living room. Now every man, woman, and I might almost say child, sees clearly what this proves!”

Of course in this he was wrong. He overestimated the intelligence of his audience. Those nearer to him, who could make themselves heard, yelled for him to go on and explain.

“Further explanation is unnecessary,” assured the psychologist. “If she felt sufficiently sentimental about her husband to preserve his love letters, obviously she did not mean to murder him. Moreover, she must have realized her marked-over letters would constitute absolute proof of the minor crime of forgery. She must have known that if her husband were murdered, her home would be searched and the tell-tale letters would be found. Therefore, she not only did not murder her husband herself but she had no suspicion that he would be murdered. Those letters in her unlocked trunk make it impossible that she should be either the principal or an accessory to his assassination.”

A breath of astonishment went over the crowd at the simplicity of Poggioli's deduction. Everyone felt that he should have thought of that for himself.

Poggioli made a motion for quiet

and indicated that his proof was not concluded. Quiet returned and the psychologist continued.

“Your minister tells us, and I also read it in the evidence printed in your county paper, that Mrs. Cancy did not hire an attorney to defend her in her trial. She used the entire money to place a new roof on the old Leatherwood church, and she told the court the reason she did this was because God would defend her.”

Here shouts arose. “He did! He's doin' it now! He's sent you here to save her!”

Poggioli held up a hand and shook his head grimly. This was the point of his whole appearance in the square—the materialistic point by which he hoped to rid these hill people of too great a reliance on providential happenings and place them on the more scientific basis of self-help. He intoned slowly,

“I regret to say, ladies and gentlemen, that my appearance here is pure accident. Why? Because I have come too late. If a supernal power had sent me here to save an innocent woman—if a supernal power had sent me, it would certainly have sent me in time. But I am not in time. The trial is over. All the proof is in. We cannot possibly ask a new trial on the ground of a reinterpretation of old proof, which is what I am giving you. That is no ground for a new trial. So this innocent woman who is on

her way to the penitentiary must go on and serve out her unjust term. My appearance here today, therefore, can be of no service to anyone and can be attributed to nothing but pure chance."

At this pitiful negation an uproar arose in the square. Men surged toward the sheriff, yelling for him to turn the woman free or they would do it for him: Cooler heads held back the insurgents and voices shouted out,

"Dr. Poggioli, who did do the murder? You know ever'thing—who done it!"

The criminologist wagged a negative hand. "I have no idea."

"The devil!" cried a thick-set fellow. "Go ahead an' reason out who killed Jim Cancy—jest like you reasoned out his wife was innocent!"

"I can't do that. It's impossible. I haven't studied the evidence of the murder, merely the evidence that proves non-murder—a completely different thing."

"Go ahead!" yelled half a dozen voices. "The Lord has he'ped you so fur—He'll stan by you!"

It was amusing, in a grim fashion, for the crowd to twist the very materialistic point Poggioli was making into a logical basis for a spiritualistic interpretation. However, I do not think Poggioli was amused. He held up his hands.

"Friends, how could I know anything about this when I stopped over for lunch in this village only one hour ago?"

A dried-up old farmer, whose face had about the color and texture of one of his own corn shucks, called out, "Somebody shot Jim, didn't they Dr. Poggioli?"

"Oh, yes, somebody shot him."

"Well, have you got any idyah of the kind of man who shot Jim Cancy?"

"Oh, certainly. I have a fairly clear idea of the kind of man who murdered Cancy."

"I allowed you had, Brother, I allowed you had," nodded the old fellow with satisfaction. "The Lord put it into my heart to ast you exactly that question." The old fellow turned to the officer, "Shurrf Matheny, has he got time to tell what kind of a fellow murdered Jim before you start with Sister Cordy to the pen?"

The officer held up his hand. "I am extendin' Sister Cordy's startin' time two more hours—so we can find out who murdered her husban' instid of her."

"O.K." called a woman's voice, "go ahead and tell us the kind of skunk that done that!"

"Well, Madam, I would say it was a man who shot Jim Cancy."

"Oh, yes, we all know that," shouted several listeners. "Women don't shoot nobody, they pisen 'em . . . as a rule." "Go on, tell us somp'm else."

"Well, let me see," pondered Poggioli aloud. "Let us begin back with the forgery itself. Mrs. Cancy did this. She admits it. But she did

not originate the idea, because that is a highly criminal idea and she does not have a highly criminal psychology. She has, in fact, a very religious and dutiful psychology. I also know that if she had been bright enough to think of tracing the will from her old love letters, she would have realized how dangerous they were to keep in her unlocked trunk and would have destroyed them immediately. Therefore, I know somebody suggested to her how she could forge the will."

More angry shouts interrupted here, as if the crowd were reaching for the real criminal. Some voices tried to hush the others so the psychologist could proceed. Eventually Poggioli went on.

"All right, Mrs. Cancy did not originate the idea of forgery. Then she was used as a tool. But she is not a hard, resolute woman. Just look at her there in the sheriff's car and you can see that. She is a soft, yielding woman and would not carry any plan through to its bitter end. But in her trial she did carry a plan through to its bitter end, and this end, odd to say, was to put a new roof on the Leatherwood church. Ladies and gentlemen, a new roof on Leatherwood church was the basic motive for Cancy's murder. It is fantastic, but it is the truth. Mrs. Cancy refused to hire a lawyer when she came to trial. Why? To save the money to put a roof on Leatherwood church.

So the person who persuaded her to commit the forgery must also have persuaded her to withhold the money for the church roof, and that God would come down and set her free from the charge of murder."

At this the enthusiasm of the crowd knew no bounds. They flung up their hats, they yelled, they cried out that now the Lord had come to help Sister Cordy just like He had promised. The sheriff arose in his car and shouted that he extended Sister Cordy's leaving time for the rest of the day. He yelled that they were hot on the trail of the man who done it and he would remain in town to make the arrest.

I could see Poggioli was unnerved. It would take a cleverer psychologist than I am to explain why he should be. Of course, his demonstration was going awry. He was not getting where he had intended to go. He lifted up his hands and begged the crowd.

"My friends, please remember this. I do not know the man. I have no idea who he is. I can only give you his type."

"All right," shouted many voices, "go on and give us his type, so Sheriff Matheny can arrest him!"

The criminologist collected himself. "As to his type: I ate lunch in the Monarch café a little while ago and was reading an account of Mrs. Cancy's trial in your county paper. As I read, a gentleman beside me

said that he had been watching strangers read the story of that trial for months, as it lay there on the lunch counter. It is possible such a man might have some connection with the murder; or he may have been morbidly curious about crime in general—”

Shouts of satisfaction here—“Go ahead, now you’re gittin’ somewhere!”

Poggioli stopped them. “Wait! Wait! I by no means incriminate this gentleman. I am trying to show you the various hypotheses which a criminologist must apply to every clue or piece of evidence.”

“All right, Doctor, if he didn’t kill Jim Cancy, who did?”

Poggioli mopped his face. “That I do not know, nor do I know anything whatever about the man in the café. I am simply trying to give you a possible psychological description of the murderer. Now, this man at my table also reprimanded my friend here for what he considered to be an infraction of a religious formality. In fact, he became quite angry about it. That would link up with the fact that Jim Cancy was reported to be a free-thinker. A free-thinker would have irritated such a man very deeply. If Cancy had jibed at this man’s faith, the fellow would have felt that any punishment he could inflict on the mocker would be justified, even unto death. Also, he could have persuaded himself that any money he might receive from

Cancy’s death should be devoted to the welfare of the church—as for example, to put a new roof on the Leatherwood church. Following these plans, he could have easily influenced Mrs. Cancy to forge Cancy’s will, with the understanding that the money would go to the church. Then he could have waylaid and shot Cancy, and made the will collectible. This would have accomplished two things; gratify his private revenge and make a contribution to the church. . . . The murderer could be of that type or he could be of a completely different type which I shall now try to analyze. . . .”

How many more types Poggioli would have described nobody knew, for at this juncture the sheriff discovered that his prisoner had fainted. This created a tremendous commotion. For a hill woman to faint was almost as unparalleled as for a horse to faint. Sheriff Matheiny arose in his car and hallooed that he would carry no sick woman to the Nashville pen, and that Mrs. Cancy should remain here with her baby until she was completely recovered, even if it took a week. After making this announcement, the officer climbed out of his car and disappeared in the throng.

Everybody was gratified. They came pouring around Poggioli to congratulate him on his speech. A fat man elbowed up, seized Poggioli by the arm, motioned at me, too, and shouted at us to come to

dinner in his hotel. Poggioli said we had just eaten at the Monarch café.

"Then you-all are bound to be hungry. Come on, my wife sent me over here to bring ye. She feeds all the revivalists and their singers who come to preach in the square."

The criminologist repeated that we were not hungry, but the fat man came close to him and said in what was meant for an undertone:

"Don't make no diff'rence whether you are hungry or not—my wife wants you to come inside while you and your buddy are alive!"

"Alive!" said my friend.

"Shore, alive. Do you think Deacon Sam Hawley will let any man stand up in the public square and accuse him of waylayin' Jim Cancy, and then not kill the man who does the accusin'?"

My friend was shocked. "Why, I never heard of Deacon Sam Hawley!"

"He's the man you et by, and he knows you. Come on, both of you!"

"But I was simply describing a type—"

"Brother, when you go to a city you find men in types—all dentists look alike, all bankers look alike, all lawyers look alike, and so on; but out here in these Tennessee hills we ain't got but one man to a type. And when you describe a man's type, you've described the man. Come on in to my hotel before you git shot. We're trying to

make Lanesburg a summer resort and we don't want it to git a bad name for murderin' tourists."

We could see how a hotel owner would feel that way and we too were anxious to help preserve Lanesburg's reputation for peace and friendliness. We followed our host rather nervously to his hotel across the square and sat down to another lunch.

There was a big crowd in the hotel and they were all talking about the strange way the Lord had brought about the conviction of Deacon Sam Hawley, and rescued a comparatively innocent woman from an unjust sentence. Poggioli pointed out once or twice that the woman was not out of danger yet, but all the diners around us were quite sure that she soon would be.

The whole incident seemed about to end on a kind of unresolved anti-climax. The diners finally finished their meal and started out of the hotel. We asked some of the men if they thought it would be safe for us to go to our car. They said they didn't know, we would have to try it and see. Poggioli and I waited until quite a number of men and women were going out of the hotel and joined them. We were just well out on the sidewalk when a brisk gunfire broke out from behind the office of the *Lane County Weekly Herald*, which was just across the street from the hotel. It was not entirely unexpected. Besides, that sort of thing seemed to

happen often enough in Lanesburg to create a pattern for public action. Everybody jumped behind everybody else, and holding that formation made for the nearest doors and alleys. At this point Sheriff Matheny began his counterattack. It was from a butcher's shop close to the hotel. How he knew what point to pick out, I don't know; whether or not he was using us for bait, I still don't know.

At any rate, the sheriff's fourth or fifth shot ended the battle. Our assailant, quite naturally, turned out to be Deacon Sam Hawley. He was dead when the crowd identified him. In the skirmish the sheriff was shot in the arm, and everybody agreed that now he would not be able to take Mrs. Cancy to the penitentiary for a good three months to come. She was relieved at least for that long.

As we got into our car and drove out of Lanesburg, the crowd was circulating a petition to the Governor to pardon Mrs. Cordelia Cancy of the minor crime of forgery. The petition set forth Mrs. Cancy's charity, her purity of heart, her generosity in using the proceeds of her crime for the church, and a number of her other neighborly virtues. The village lawyer put in a note that a wife cannot forge her husband's signature. He argued that if she cannot steal from him, then she cannot forge his name, which is a form of theft. She simply signs his name for him, she does not forge it.

The petition was signed by two hundred and forty-three registered Democratic voters. The Governor of Tennessee is a Democrat.

At this point we drove out of Lanesburg . . .



Melville Davisson Post

A Twilight Adventure

In Melville Davisson Post's equally superb story, Uncle Abner and his "Watson" stop over at a Virginia crossroad and in this short interruption of their journey Uncle Abner investigates a murder mystery altogether different from the Poggioli-Stribling case, prevents an altogether different kind of miscarriage of justice, and teaches an altogether different lesson in mass psychology and civilized behavior . . .

IT WAS A STRANGE SCENE THAT WE approached. Before a crossroad leading into a grove of beech trees, a man sat on his horse with a rifle across his saddle. He did not speak until we were before him in the road, and then his words were sinister.

"Ride on!" he said.

But my Uncle Abner did not ride on. He pulled up his big chestnut and looked calmly at the man facing him.

"You speak like one having authority," he said.

"Ride on, or you'll get into trouble!"

"I am accustomed to trouble," replied my uncle with great composure; "you must give me a better reason."

"I'll give you hell!" growled the man. "Ride on!"

Abner's eyes traveled over the speaker with a deliberate scrutiny.

"It is not yours to give," he said, "although possibly to receive. Are

the roads of Virginia held by arms?"

"This one is," replied the man.

"I think not," replied my Uncle Abner, and touching his horse with his heel, he turned into the crossroad.

The man seized his weapon, and I heard the hammer click under his thumb. Abner must have heard it, too, but he did not turn his broad back. He only called to me in his usual matter-of-fact voice:

"Go on, Martin; I will overtake you."

The man brought his gun up to his middle, but he did not shoot. He was like all those who undertake to command obedience without having first determined precisely what they will do if their orders are disregarded. He was prepared to threaten with desperate words, but not to support that threat with a desperate act, and he hung there uncertain, cursing under his breath.

I would have gone on as my uncle had told me to do, but now the man came to a decision.

"No, by God!" he said; "if he goes in, you go in, too!"

And he seized my bridle and turned my horse into the cross-road; then he followed.

There is a long twilight in these hills. The sun departs, but the day remains. A sort of weird, dim, elfin day, that dawns at sunset, and envelops and possesses the world. The land is full of light, but it is the light of no heavenly sun. It is a light equal everywhere; as though the earth strove to illumine itself, and succeeded with that labor.

The stars are not yet out. Now and then a pale moon rides in the sky, but it has no power, and the light is not from it. The wind is usually gone; the air is soft, and the fragrance of the fields fills it like a perfume. The noises of the day and of the creatures that go about by day cease, and the noises of the night and of the creatures that haunt the night begin. The bat swoops and circles in the maddest action, but without a sound. The eye sees him, but the ear hears nothing. The whippoorwill begins his plaintive cry, and one hears, but does not see.

It is a world that we do not understand, for we are creatures of the sun, and we are fearful lest we come upon things at work here of which we have no experience, and that may be able to justify them-

selves against our reason. And so a man falls into silence when he travels in this twilight, and he looks and listens with his senses out on guard.

It was an old wagon-road that we entered, with the grass growing between the ruts. The horses traveled without a sound until we began to enter a grove of ancient beech trees; then the dead leaves cracked and rustled. Abner did not look behind him, and so he did not know that I came. He knew that someone followed, but he doubtless took it for the sentinel in the road.

The man with the cocked gun rode grimly behind me. I did not know whither we went or to what end. We might be shot down from behind a tree or murdered in our saddles. It was not a land where men took desperate measures upon a triviality. And I knew that Abner rode into something that little men, lacking courage and heart, would gladly have stayed out of.

Presently my ear caught a sound, or, rather, a confused mingling of sounds, as of men digging in the earth. It was faint, and some distance beyond us in the heart of the beech woods, but as we traveled the sound increased and I could distinguish the strokes of the mattock, and the thrust of the shovel and the clatter of the earth on the dry leaves.

These sounds seemed at first to be before us, and then, a little later,

off on our right hand. And finally, through the gray boles of the beech trees in the lowland, I saw two men at work digging a pit. They had just begun their work, for there was little earth thrown out. But there was a great heap of leaves that they had cleared away, and heavy cakes of the baked crust that the mattocks had pried up. The length of the pit lay at right angles to the road, and the men were working with their backs toward us. They were in their shirts and trousers, and the heavy mottled shadows thrown by the beech limbs hovered on their backs and shoulders like a flock of night birds. The earth was baked and hard; the mattock rang on it, and among the noises of their work they did not hear us.

I saw Abner look off at this strange labor, his head half turned, but he did not stop and we went on. The old wagon-road made a turn into the low ground. I heard the sound of horses, and a moment later we came upon a dozen men.

I shall not easily forget that scene. The beech trees had been deadened by some settler who had chopped a ring around them, and they stood gaunt with a few tattered leaves, letting the weird twilight in. Some of the men stood about, others sat on the fallen trees, and others in their saddles. But upon every man there was the air and aspect of one who waits for something to be finished.

An old man with a heavy iron-gray beard smoked a pipe, puffing out great mouthfuls of smoke with a sort of deliberate energy; another whittled a stick, cutting a bull with horns, and shaping his work with the nicest care; and still another traced letters on the pommel of his saddle with his thumbnail.

A little to one side a great pronged beech thrust out a gray arm, and under it two men sat on their horses, their elbows strapped to their bodies and their mouths gagged with a saddle-cloth. And behind them a man in his saddle was working with a colt halter, unraveling the twine that bound the headpiece and seeking thereby to get a greater length of rope.

This was the scene when I caught it first. But a moment later, when my uncle rode into it, the thing burst into furious life. Men sprang up, caught his horse by the bit and covered him with weapons. Someone called for the sentinal who rode behind me, and he galloped up. For a moment there was confusion. Then the big man who had smoked with such deliberation called out my uncle's name, others repeated it, and the panic was gone. But a ring of stern, determined faces were around him and before his horse, and with the passing of the flash of action there passed no whit of the grim purpose upon which these men were set.

My uncle looked about him.

"Lemuel Arnold," he said; "Nicholas Vance, Hiram Ward, you here!"

As my uncle named these men I knew them. They were cattle grazers. Ward was the big man with the pipe. The men with them were their renters and drovers.

Their lands lay nearest to the mountains. The geographical position made for feudal customs and a certain independence of action. They were on the border, they were accustomed to say, and had to take care of themselves. And it ought to be written that they did take care of themselves with courage and decision, and on occasion they also took care of Virginia.

Their fathers had pushed the frontier of the dominion northward and westward and had held the land. They had fought the savage single-handed and desperately, by his own methods and with his own weapons. Ruthless and merciless, eye for eye and tooth for tooth, they returned what they were given.

They did not send to Virginia for militia when the savage came; they fought him at their doors, and followed him through the forest, and took their toll of death. They were harder than he was, and their hands were heavier and bloodier, until the old men in the tribes of the Ohio Valley forbade these raids because they cost too much, and turned the war parties south into Kentucky.

Certain historians have written

severely of these men and their ruthless methods, and prattled of humane warfare; but they wrote nursing their soft spines in the security of a civilization which these men's hands had builded, and their words are hollow.

"Abner," said Ward, "let me speak plainly. We have got an account to settle with a couple of cattle thieves and we are not going to be interfered with. Cattle stealing and murder have got to stop in these hills. We've had enough of it."

"Well," replied my uncle, "I am the last man in Virginia to interfere with that. We have all had enough of it, and we are all determined that it must cease. But how do you propose to end it?"

"With a rope," said Ward.

"It is a good way," replied Abner, "when it is done the right way."

"What do you mean by the right way?" said Ward.

"I mean," answered my uncle, "that we have all agreed to a way and we ought to stick to our agreement. Now, I want to help you to put down cattle stealing and murder, but I want also to keep my word."

"And how have you given your word?"

"In the same way that you have given yours," said Abner, "and as every man here has given his. Our fathers found out that they could not manage the assassin and the

thief when every man undertook to act for himself, so they got together and agreed upon a certain way to do these things. Now, we have indorsed what they agreed to, and promised to obey it, and I for one would like to keep my promise."

The big man's face was puzzled. Now it cleared.

"Hell!" he said. "You mean the law?"

"Call it what you like," replied Abner; "it is merely the agreement of everybody to do certain things in a certain way."

The man made a decisive gesture with a jerk of his head.

"Well," he said, "we're going to do this thing our own way."

My uncle's face became thoughtful.

"Then," he said, "you will injure some innocent people."

"You mean these two blacklegs, Shifflet and Twiggs?"

And Ward indicated the prisoners.

My uncle lifted his face and looked at the two men some distance away beneath the great beech, as though he had but now observed them.

"I was not thinking of them," he answered. "I was thinking that if men like you and Lemuel Arnold and Nicholas Vance violate the law, lesser men will follow your example, and as you justify your act for security, they will justify theirs for revenge and plunder.

And so the law will go to pieces and a lot of weak and innocent people who depend upon it for security will be left unprotected."

These were words that I have remembered, because they put the danger of lynch law in a light I had not thought of. But I saw that they would not move these determined men. Their blood was up and they received them coldly.

"Abner," said Ward, "we are not going to argue this thing with you. There are times when men have to take the law into their own hands. We live here at the foot of the mountains. Our cattle are stolen and run across the border into Maryland. We are tired of it and we intend to stop it. Our lives and our property are menaced by a set of reckless desperate devils that we have determined to hunt down and hang to the first tree in sight. We did not send for you. You pushed your way in here; and now, if you are afraid of breaking the law, you can ride on, because we are going to break it—if to hang a pair of murderous devils is to break it."

I was astonished at my uncle's decision.

"Well," he said, "if the law must be broken, I will stay and help you break it!"

"Very well," replied Ward; "but don't get a wrong notion in your head, Abner. If you choose to stay, you put yourself on a footing with everybody else."

"And that is precisely what I want to do," replied Abner, "but as matters stand now, every man here has an advantage over me."

"What advantage, Abner?" said Ward.

"The advantage," answered my uncle, "that he has heard all the evidence against your prisoners and is convinced that they are guilty."

"If that is all the advantage, Abner," replied Ward, "you shall not be denied it. There has been so much cattle stealing here of late that our people living on the border finally got together and determined to stop every drove going up into the mountains that wasn't accompanied by somebody that we knew was all right. This afternoon one of my men reported a little bunch of about a hundred steers on the road, and I stopped it. These two men were driving the cattle. I inquired if the cattle belonged to them and they replied that they were not the owners, but that they had been hired to take the drove over into Maryland. I did not know the men, and as they met my inquiries with oaths and imprecations, I was suspicious of them. I demanded the name of the owner who had hired them to drive the cattle. They said it was none of my damned business and went on. I raised the county. We overtook them, turned their cattle into a field, and brought them back until we could find out who the drove

belonged to. On the road we met Bowers."

He turned and indicated the man who was working with the rope halter.

I knew the man. He was a cattle shipper, somewhat involved in debt, but who managed to buy and sell and somehow keep his head above water.

"He told us the truth. Yesterday evening he had gone over on the Stone-Coal to look at Daniel Coopman's cattle. He had heard that some grazer from your county, Abner, was on the way up to buy the cattle for stockers. He wanted to get in ahead of your man, so he left home that evening and got to Coopman's place about sundown. He took a short cut on foot over the hill, and when he came out he saw a man on the opposite ridge, where the road runs, ride away. The man seemed to have been sitting on his horse looking down into the little valley where Coopman's house stands. Bowers went down to the house, but Coopman was not there. The door was open, and Bowers says the house looked as though Coopman had just gone out of it and might come back any moment. There was no one about, because Coopman's wife had gone on a visit to her daughter, over the mountains, and the old man was alone.

"Bowers thought Coopman was out showing the cattle to the man whom he had just seen ride off, so

he went out to the pasture field to look for him. He could not find him and he could not find the cattle. He came back to the house to wait until Coopman should come in. He sat down on the porch. As he sat there he noticed that the porch had been scrubbed and was still wet. He looked at it and saw that it had been scrubbed only at one place before the door. This seemed to him a little peculiar, and he wondered why Coopman had scrubbed his porch only in one place. He got up and as he went toward the door he saw that the jamb of the door was splintered at a point about halfway up. He examined the splintered place and presently discovered that it was a bullet hole.

"This alarmed him, and he went out into the yard. There he saw a wagon track leading away from the house toward the road. In the weeds he found Coopman's watch. He picked it up and put it into his pocket. It was a big silver watch, with Coopman's name on it, and attached to it was a buckskin string. He followed the track to the gate, where it entered the road. He discovered then that the cattle had also passed through this gate. It was now night. Bowers went back, got Coopman's saddle horse out of the stable, rode him home, and followed the track of the cattle this morning, but he saw no trace of the drove until we met him."

"What did Shifflet and Twiggs

say to this story?" inquired Abner.

"They did not hear it," answered Ward; "Bowers did not talk before them."

"Did Shifflet and Twiggs know Bowers?" said Abner.

"I don't know," replied Ward; "their talk was so foul when we stopped the drove that we had to tie their mouths up."

"Is that all?" said Abner.

Ward swore a great oath.

"No!" he said. "Do you think we would hang men on that? From what Bowers told us, we thought Shifflet and Twiggs had killed Daniel Coopman and driven off his cattle; but we wanted to be certain of it, so we set out to discover what they had done with Coopman's body after they had killed him and what they had done with the wagon. We followed the trail of the drove down to the Valley River. No wagon had crossed, but on the other side we found that a wagon and a drove of cattle had turned out of the river and gone along the basin of the river for about a mile through the woods. And there in a bend of the river we found where these devils had camped."

"There had been a great fire of logs very near to the river, but none of the ashes of this fire remained. From a circular space some twelve feet in diameter the ashes had all been shoveled off, the marks of the shovel being distinct. In the center of the place where this fire had burned, the ground had been

scraped clean, but near the edges there were some traces of cinders and the ground was blackened. In the river at this point, just opposite the remains of the fire, was a natural washout or hole. We made a raft of logs, cut a pole with a fork on the end, and dragged the river. We found most of the wagon iron, all showing the effect of fire. Then we fastened a tin bucket to a pole and fished the washout. We brought up cinders, buttons, buckles, and pieces of bone."

Ward paused.

"That settled it, and we came back here to swing the devils up."

My uncle had listened very carefully, and now he spoke.

"What did the man pay Twigg's and Shifflet?" said my uncle. "Did they tell you that when you stopped the drove?"

"Now that," answered Ward, "was another piece of damning evidence. When we searched the men we found a pocketbook on Shifflet with a hundred and fifteen dollars and some odd cents. It was Daniel Coopman's pocketbook, because there was an old tax receipt in it that had slipped down between the leather and the lining. We asked Shifflet where he got it, and he said that the fifteen dollars and the change was his own money and that the hundred had been paid to him by the man who had hired them to drive the cattle. He explained his possession of the pocketbook by saying that this man had

the money in it, and when he went to pay them he said that they might just as well take it with them, too."

"Who was this man?" said Abner.

"They will not tell who he was."

"Why not?"

"Now, Abner," cried Ward, "why not, indeed! Because there never was any such man. The story is a lie out of the whole cloth. Those two devils are guilty as hell. The proof is all dead against them."

"Well," replied my uncle, "what circumstantial evidence proves depends a good deal on how you get started. It is a somewhat dangerous road to the truth, because all the signboards have a curious trick of pointing in the direction that you are going. Now, a man will never realize this unless he turns around and starts back, then he will see, to his amazement that the signboards have also turned. But as long as his face is set one certain way, it is of no use to talk to him, he won't listen to you; and if he sees you going the other way, he will call you a fool."

"There is only one way in this case," said Ward.

"There are always two ways in every case," replied Abner, "that the suspected person is either guilty or innocent. You have started upon the theory that Shifflet and Twigg's are guilty. Now, suppose you had started the other way, what then?"

"Well," said Ward, "what then?"

"This, then," continued Abner.

"You stop Shifflet and Twiggs on the road with Daniel Coopman's cattle, and they tell you that a man has hired them to drive this drove into Maryland. You believe that and start out to find the man. You find Bowers!"

Bowers went deadly white.

"For God's sake, Abner!" he said.

But my uncle was merciless and he drove in the conclusion.

"What then?"

There was no answer, but the faces of the men about my uncle turned toward the man whose trembling hands fingered the rope that he was preparing for others.

"But the things we found, Abner?" said Ward.

"What do they prove," continued my uncle, "now that the sign boards are turned? That somebody killed Daniel Coopman and drove off his cattle, and afterward destroyed the body and the wagon in which it was hauled away. . . . But who did that? . . . The men who were driving Daniel Coopman's cattle, or the man who was riding Daniel Coopman's horse, and carrying Daniel Coopman's watch in his pocket?"

Ward's face was a study in expression.

"Ah!" cried Abner. "Remember that the signboards have turned about. And what do they point to if we read them on the way we are going now? The man who killed Coopman was afraid to be found with the cattle, so he hired Twiggs

and Shifflet to drive them into Maryland for him and follows on another road."

"But his story, Abner?" said Ward.

"And what of it?" replied my uncle. "He is taken and he must explain how he comes by the horse that he rides, and the watch that he carries, and he must find the criminal. Well, he tells you a tale to fit the facts that you will find when you go back to look, and he gives you Shifflet and Twiggs to hang."

I never saw a man in more mortal terror than Jacob Bowers.

"My God!" he said, and again he repeated it, and again.

And he had cause for that terror on him. My uncle was stern and ruthless. The pendulum had swung the other way, and the lawless monster that Bowers had allied was now turning on himself. He saw it and his joints unhinged with fear.

A voice crashed out of the ring of desperate men, uttering the changed opinion.

"By God!" it cried, "we've got the right man now."

And one caught the rope out of Bowers's hand.

But my Uncle Abner rode in on them.

"Are you sure about that?" he said.

"Sure!" they echoed. "You have shown it yourself, Abner."

"No," replied my uncle, "I have not shown it. I have shown merely whither circumstantial evidence

leads us when we go hotfoot after a theory. Bowers says that there was a man on the hill above Daniel Coopman's house, and this man will know that he did not kill Daniel Coopman and that his story is the truth."

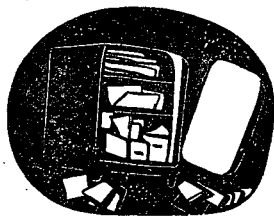
They laughed in my uncle's face. "Do you believe that there was

any such person on the hill?"

My uncle seemed to increase in stature, and his voice became big and dominant.

"I do," he said, "because I am the man!"

They had got their lesson, and we rode out with Shifflet and Twiggs to a legal trial.



Dorothy L. Sayers

The Haunted Policeman

Miss Sayers once-wrote: "Plot is not everything, style is not everything; only by combining them can we get a detective story that is also good literature" . . . and so we give you one of Miss Sayers's stories about Lord Peter Wimsey—a lesser known tale, but a haunted and haunting one . . .

GOOD GOD!" SAID HIS LORDSHIP.
"Did I do that?"

"All the evidence points that way," replied his wife.

"Then I can only say that I never knew so convincing a body of evidence produce such an inadequate result."

The nurse appeared to take this reflection personally. She said in a tone of rebuke: "He's a *beautiful* boy."

"H'm," said Peter. He adjusted his eyeglass. "Well, you're the expert witness. Hand him over."

The nurse did so, with a dubious air. She was relieved to see that this disconcerting parent handled the child competently; as, in a man who was an experienced uncle, was not, after all, so very surprising. Lord Peter sat down gingerly on the bed.

"Do you feel it's up to standard?" he inquired with some anxiety. "Of course, *your* workmanship's always sound—but you never know with these collaborate efforts."

"I think it'll do," said Harriet.

"Good." He turned abruptly to the nurse. "All right; we'll keep it. Take it and put it away, and tell 'em to invoice it to me. It's a very interesting addition to you, Harriet; but it would have been a hell of a rotten substitute." His voice wavered a little, for in the last twenty-four hours he had had the fright of his life.

The doctor, who had been doing something in the other room, entered in time to catch the last words.

"There was never any likelihood of that, you goop," he said, cheerfully. "Now, you've seen all there is to be seen, and you'd better run away and play." He led his charge firmly to the door. "Go to bed," he advised him in kindly accents; "you look all in."

"I'm all right," said Peter. "I haven't been doing anything. And look here—" He stabbed a belligerent finger in the direction of the adjoining room. "Tell those nurses of yours, if I want to pick my son

up, I'll pick him up. If his mother wants to kiss him, she can kiss him. I'll have none of your infernal hygiene in *my* house."

"Very well," said the doctor, "just as you like. Anything for a quiet life. I rather believe in a few healthy germs myself. Builds up resistance. No, thanks, I won't have a drink. I've got to go to another one, and an alcoholic breath impairs confidence."

"Another one?" said Peter, aghast.

"One of my hospital mothers. You're not the only fish in the sea by a long chalk. One born every minute."

"God! what a world." They passed down the great curved stair. In the hall a sleepy footman clung, yawning, to his post of duty.

"All right, William," said Peter. "Buzz off now; I'll lock up." He let the doctor out. "Good night—and thanks very much, old man. I'm sorry I swore at you."

"They mostly do," replied the doctor philosophically. "Well, bung-ho, Flim. I'll look in again later, just to earn my fee, but I shan't be wanted. You've married into a good tough family, and I congratulate you."

The car, spluttering and protesting a little after its long wait in the cold, drove off, leaving Peter alone on the doorstep. Now that it was all over and he could go to bed, he felt extraordinarily wakeful. He would have liked to go to a party.

He leaned back against the wrought-iron railings and lit a cigarette, staring vaguely into the lamp-lit dusk of the square. It was thus that he saw the policeman.

The blue-uniformed figure came up from the direction of South Audley Street. He too was smoking, and he walked, not with the firm tramp of a constable on his beat, but with the hesitating step of a man who has lost his bearings. When he came in sight he had pushed back his helmet and was rubbing his head in a puzzled manner. Official habit made him look sharply at the bare-headed gentleman in evening dress, abandoned on a doorstep at three in the morning, but since the gentleman appeared to be sober and bore no signs of being about to commit a felony, he averted his gaze and prepared to pass on.

"Morning, officer," said the gentleman, as he came abreast with him.

"Morning, sir," said the policeman.

"You're off duty early," pursued Peter, who wanted somebody to talk to. "Come in and have a drink."

This offer reawakened all the official suspicion.

"Not just now, sir, thank you," replied the policeman guardedly.

"Yes, now. That's the point." Peter tossed away his cigarette. It described a fiery arc in the air and shot out a little train of sparks as

it struck the pavement. "I've got a son."

"Oh, ah!" said the policeman, relieved by this innocent confidence. "Your first, eh?"

"And last, if I know anything about it."

"That's what my brother says, every time," said the policeman. "Never no more, he says. He's got eleven. Well, sir, good luck to it. I see how you're situated, and thank you kindly, but after what the sergeant said I dunno as I better. Though if I was to die this moment, not a drop 'as passed me lips since me supper beer."

Peter put his head on one side and considered this.

"The sergeant said you were drunk?"

"He did, sir."

"And you were not?"

"No, sir. I saw everything just the same as I told him, though what's become of it now is more than I can say. But drunk I was not, sir."

"Then," said Peter, "as Mr. Joseph Surface remarked to Lady Teazle, what is troubling you is the consciousness of your own innocence. He insinuated that you had looked on the wine when it was red—you'd better come in and make it so. You'll feel better."

The policeman hesitated.

"Well, sir, I dunno. Fact is, I've had a bit of a shock."

"So've I," said Peter. "Come in and keep me company."

"Well, sir—" said the policeman again. He mounted the steps.

The logs in the hall chimney were glowing a deep red through their ashes. Peter raked them apart, so that the young flame shot up between them. "Sit down," he said; "I'll be back in a moment."

The policeman sat down, removed his helmet, and stared about him, trying to remember who occupied the big house at the corner of the Square. The engraved coat-of-arms upon the great silver bowl on the chimney-piece told him nothing, even though it was repeated in color upon the backs of two tapestried chairs; three white mice skipping upon a black ground. Peter, returning quietly from the shadows beneath the stair, caught him as he traced the outlines with a thick finger.

"A student of heraldry?" he said. "Seventeenth-century work and not very graceful. You're new to this beat, aren't you? My name's Wimsey."

He put down a tray on the table.

"If you'd rather have beer or whiskey, say so. These bottles are only a concession to my mood."

The policeman eyed the long necks and bulging silver-wrapped corks with curiosity. "Champagne?" he said. "Never tasted it, sir. But I'd like to try the stuff."

"You'll find it thin," said Peter, "but if you drink enough of it, you'll tell me the story of your life." The cork popped, and the wine

frothed out into the wide glasses.

"Well!" said the policeman. "Here's to your good lady, sir, and the new young gentleman. Long life and all the best. A bit in the nature of cider, ain't it, sir?"

"Just a trifle. Give me your opinion after the third glass, if you can put up with it so long. And thanks for your good wishes. You a married man?"

"Not yet, sir. Hoping to be when I get promotion. If only the sergeant—but that's neither here nor there. You been married long, sir, if I may ask?"

"Just over a year."

"Ah! and do you find it comfortable, sir?"

Peter laughed.

"I've spent the past twenty-four hours wondering why, when I'd had the blazing luck to get onto a perfectly good thing, I should be fool enough to risk the whole show on a silly experiment."

The policeman nodded sympathetically.

"I see what you mean, sir. Seems to me, life's like that. If you don't take risks, you get nowhere. If you do, they may go wrong, and then where are you? And 'alf the time, when things happen, they happen first, before you can even think about 'em."

"Quite right," said Peter, and filled the glasses again. He found the policeman soothing. True to his class and training, he turned naturally in moments of emotion to

the company of the common man. Indeed, when the recent domestic crisis had threatened to destroy his nerve, he had headed for the butler's pantry with the swift instinct of the homing pigeon. There, they had treated him with great humanity, and allowed him to clean the silver.

With a mind oddly clarified by champagne and lack of sleep, he watched the constable's reaction to Pol Roger 1926. The first glass had produced a philosophy of life; the second produced a name—Alfred Burt—and further hints of some mysterious grievance against the station sergeant; the third glass, as prophesied, produced the story.

"You were right, sir" (said the policeman), "when you spotted I was new to the beat. I only come on it at the beginning of the week, and that accounts for me not being acquainted with you, sir, nor with most of the residents about here. Jessop, now, he knows everybody, and so did Pinker—but he's been took off to another division. You'd remember Pinker—big chap, make two o' me, with a sandy mustache. Yes, I thought you would."

"Well, sir, as I was saying, me knowing the district in a general way, but not, so to speak, like the palm o' me 'and, might account for me making a bit of a fool of myself, but it don't account for me seeing what I did see. See it I did, and not drunk nor nothing like it. And as for making a mistake in

the number, well, that might happen to anybody. All the same, sir, 13 was the number I see, plain as the nose on your face."

"You can't put it stronger than that," said Peter, whose nose was of a kind difficult to overlook.

"You know Merriman's End, sir?"

"I think I do. Isn't it a long cul-de-sac running somewhere at the back of South Audley Street, with a row of houses on one side and a high wall on the other?"

"That's right, sir. Tall, narrow houses they are, all alike, with deep porches and pillars to them."

"Yes. Like an escape from the worst square in Pimlico. Horrible. Fortunately, I believe the street was never finished, or we should have had another row of the monstrosities on the opposite side. This house is pure eighteenth century. How does it strike you?"

P. C. Burt contemplated the wide hall—the Adam fireplace and paneling with their graceful shallow moldings, the pedimented doorways, the high roundheaded window lighting hall and gallery, the noble proportions of the stair. He sought for a phrase.

"It's a gentleman's house," he pronounced at length. "Room to breathe, if you see what I mean. Seems like you couldn't act vulgar in it." He shook his head. "Mind you, I wouldn't call it cosy. It ain't the place I'd choose to sit down to a kipper in the shirtsleeves. But it's

got class. I never thought about it before, but now you mention it I see what's wrong with them other houses in Merriman's End. They're sort of squeezed-like. I been into more'n one o' them tonight, and that's what they are; they're squeezed. But I was going to tell you about that.

"Just upon midnight it was" (pursued the policeman) "when I turns into Merriman's End in the ordinary course of my dooties. I'd got pretty near down towards the far end, when I see a fellow lurking about in a suspicious way under the wall. There's back gates there, you know, sir, leading into some gardens, and this chap was hanging about inside one of the gateways. A rough-looking fellow, in a baggy old coat—might a-been a tramp off the Embankment. I turned my light on him—that street's not very well lit, and it's a dark night—but I couldn't see much of his face, because he had on a ragged old hat and a big scarf round his neck. I thought he was up to no good, and I was just about to ask him what he was doing there, when I hear a most awful yell come out o' one o' them houses opposite. Ghastly it was, sir. 'Help!' it said. 'Murder! help!' fit to freeze your marrow."

"Man's voice or woman's?"

"Man's, sir, I think. More of a roaring kind of yell, if you take my meaning. I says, 'Hullo! What's up there? Which house is it?' The

chap says nothing, but he points, and him and me runs across together. Just as we gets to the house, there's a noise like as if someone was being strangled just inside, and a thump, as it might be something falling against the door."

"Good God!" said Peter.

"I gives a shout and rings the bell. 'Hoy!' I says. 'What's up here?' and then I knocks on the door. There's no answer, so I rings and knocks again. Then the chap who was with me, he pushes open the letter-flap and squints through it."

"Was there a light in the house?"

"It was all dark, sir, except the fanlight over the door. That was lit up bright, and when I looks up, I see the number of the house—No. 13, painted plain as you like on the transom. Well, this chap peers in, and all of a sudden he gives a kind of gurgle and falls back. 'Here!' I says, 'what's amiss? Let me have a look.' So I puts me eye to the flap and I looks in."

P. C. Burt paused and drew a long breath. Peter cut the wire of the second bottle.

"Now, sir," said the policeman, "believe me or believe me not, I was as sober at that moment as I am now. I can tell you everything I see in that house, same as if it was wrote up there on that wall. Not as it was a great lot, because the flap wasn't all that wide, but by squinnying a bit, I could make shift to see right across the hall and a piece

on both sides and part way up the stairs. And here's what I see, and you take notice of every word, on account of what came after."

He took another gulp of the Pol Roger to loosen his tongue and continued:

"There was the floor of the hall. I could see that very plain. All black and white squares it was, like marble, and it stretched back a good long way. About halfway along, on the left, was the staircase, with a red carpet, and the statue of a white naked woman at the foot, carrying a big pot full of blue and yellow flowers. In the wall next the stairs there was an open door, and a room all lit up. I could just see the end of a table, with a lot of glass and silver on it. Between that door and the front door there was a big black cabinet, shiny with gold figures painted on it, like them things they had at the Exhibition. Right at the back of the hall there was a place like a conservatory, but I couldn't see what was in it, only it looked very gay. There was a door on the right, and that was open, too. A very pretty drawing-room, by what I could see of it, with pale-blue paper and pictures on the walls. There were pictures in the hall, too, and a table on the right with a copper bowl, like as it might be for visitors' cards to be put in. Now, I see all that, sir, and I put it to you, if it hadn't a' been there, how could I describe it so plain?"

"I have known people describe

what wasn't there," said Peter thoughtfully, "but it was seldom anything of that kind. Rats, cats, and snakes I have heard of, and occasionally naked female figures; but delirious lacquer cabinets and hall-tables are new to me."

"As you say, sir," agreed the policeman, "and I see you believe me so far. But here's something else, what you mayn't find quite so easy. There was a man laying in that hall, sir, as sure as I sit here, and he was dead. He was a big man and clean-shaven, and he wore evening dress. Somebody had stuck a knife into his throat. I could see the handle of it—it looked like a carving-knife, and the blood had run out, all shiny, over the marble squares."

The policeman looked at Peter, passed his handkerchief over his forehead, and finished the fourth glass of champagne.

"His head was up against the end of the hall table," he went on, "and his feet must have been up against the door, but I couldn't see anything quite close to me, because of the letter-box. You understand, sir, I was looking through the wire cage of the box, and there was something inside—letters, I suppose—that cut off my view downwards. But I see all the rest—in front and a bit of both sides; and it must have been regularly burnt in upon me brain, as they say, for I don't suppose I was looking more than a quarter of a minute or so.

Then all the lights went out at once, same as if somebody had turned off the main switch. So I looks round, and I don't mind telling you I felt a bit queer. And *when* I looks round, lo and behold! my bloke in the muffler had hopped it."

"The devil he had," said Peter.

"Hopped it," repeated the policeman, "and there I was. And just there, sir, is where I made my big mistake, for I thought he couldn't a-got far, and I started off up the street after him. But I couldn't see him, and I couldn't see nobody. All the houses was dark, and it come over me what a sight of funny things may go on and nobody take a mite o' notice. The way I'd shouted and banged on the door, you'd a-thought it'd a-brought out every soul in the street, not to mention that awful yelling. But there—you may have noticed it yourself, sir. A man may leave his ground-floor windows open, or have his chimney a-fire, and you may make noise enough to wake the dead, trying to draw his attention, and nobody give no heed. He's fast asleep, and the neighbors say, 'Blast that row, but it's no business of mine, and stick their 'eads under the bed clothes.'"

"Yes," said Peter. "London's like that."

"That's right, sir. A village is different. You can't pick up a pin there without somebody coming up to ask where you got it from—

but London keeps itself to itself. . . . Well, something'll have to be done, I thinks to myself, and I blows me whistle. They heard that all right. Windows started to go up all along the street. That's London, too."

Peter nodded. "London will sleep through the last trump. Puddle-in-the-Rut and Doddering-in-the-Dumps will look down their noses and put on virtuous airs. But God, Who is never surprised, will say to His angel, 'Whistle 'em up, Michael, whistle 'em up; East and West will rise from the dead at the sound of the policeman's whistle.'"

"Quite so, sir,"—said P. C. Burt; and wondered for the first time whether there might not be something in this champagne stuff after all. He waited for a moment and then resumed:

"Well, it so happened that just when I sounded my whistle, Withers—that's the man on the other beat—was in Audley Square, coming to meet me. You know, sir, we has times for meeting one another, arranged different-like every night; and 12 o'clock in the square was our rendyvoos tonight. So up he comes in, you might say, no time at all, and finds me there, with everyone a-hollering at me from the windows to know what was up. Well, naturally I didn't want the whole bunch of 'em running out into the street and our man getting away in the crowd, so I just tells 'em there's nothing, only a bit of

an accident farther along. And then I see Withers and glad enough I was. We stands there at the top o' the street, and I tells him there's a dead man laying in the hall at No. 13, and it looks to me like murder. 'Number 13?' he says, 'you can't mean No. 13. There ain't no No. 13 in Merriman's End, you fat-head; it's all even numbers.' And so it is, sir, for the houses on the other side were never built, so there's no odd numbers at all.

"Well, that gives me a bit of a jolt. I wasn't so much put out at not having remembered about the numbers, for as I tell you, I never was on the beat before this week. No; but I knew I'd seen that there number writ up plain as pie on the fanlight, and I didn't see how I could have been mistaken. But when Withers heard the rest of the story, he thought maybe I'd misread it for No. 12. It couldn't be 18, for there's only the eight houses in the road; nor it couldn't be 16 neither, for I knew it wasn't the end house. But we thought it might be 12 or 10; so away we goes to look.

"We didn't have no difficulty about getting in at No. 12. There was a very pleasant old gentleman came down in his dressing-gown, asking what the disturbance was, and could he be of use. I apologized for disturbing him, and said I was afraid there'd been an accident in one of the houses, and had he heard anything. Of course, the minute he opened the door I could

see it wasn't No. 12 we wanted; there was only a little hall with polished boards, and the walls plain paneled—all very bare and neat—and no black cabinet nor naked woman or nothing. The old gentleman said, yes, his son had heard somebody shouting and knocking a few minutes earlier. He'd got up and put his head out of the window, but couldn't see nothing, but they thought from the sound it was No. 14 forgotten his latch-key again. So we thanked him very much and went on to No. 14.

"We had a bit of a job to get No. 14 downstairs. A fiery sort of gentleman he was, something in the military way, I thought, but he turned out to be a retired Indian Civil Servant. A dark gentleman, with a big voice, and his servant was dark, too. The gentleman wanted to know what the blazes all this row was about, and why a decent citizen wasn't allowed to get his proper sleep. He supposed that young fool at No. 12 was drunk again. Withers had to speak a bit sharp to him; but at last the servant came down and let us in. Well, we had to apologize once more. The hall was not a bit like—the staircase was on the wrong side, for one thing, and though there was a statue at the foot of it, it was some kind of a heathen idol with a lot of heads and arms, and the walls were covered with all sorts of brass stuff and native goods—you know the kind of thing. There

was a black-and-white linoleum on the floor and that was about all there was to it. The servant had a soft sort of way with him I didn't half like. He said he slept at the back and had heard nothing till his master rang for him. Then the gentleman came to the top of the stairs and shouted out it was no use disturbing him; the noise came from No. 12 as usual, and if that young man didn't stop his blanky Bohemian goings-on, he'd have the law on his father. I asked if he'd seen anything, and he said, no, he hadn't. Of course, sir, me and that other chap was inside the porch, and you can't see anything what goes on inside those porches from the other houses, because they're filled in at the sides with colored glass—all the lot of them."

Lord Peter Wimsey looked at the policeman and then looked at the bottle, as though estimating the alcoholic content of each. With deliberation, he filled both glasses again.

"Well, sir," said P. C. Burt, after refreshing himself, "by this time Withers was looking at me in rather an old-fashioned manner. However, he said nothing, and we went back to No. 10, where there was two maiden ladies and a hall full of stuffed birds and wallpaper like a florist's catalogue. The one who slept in the front was deaf as a post, and the one who slept at the back hadn't heard nothing. But we got hold of their maids, and the cook

said she'd heard the voice calling 'Help!' and thought it was in No. 12, and she'd hid her head in the pillow and said her prayers. The housemaid was a sensible girl. She'd looked out when she'd heard me knocking. She couldn't see anything at first, owing to us being in the porch, but she thought something must be going on, so, not wishing to catch cold, she went back to put on her bedroom slippers. When she got back to the window, she was just in time to see a man running up the road. He went very quick and very silent, as if he had goloshes on, and she could see the ends of his muffler flying out behind him. She saw him run out of the street and turn to the right, and then she heard me coming along after him. Unfortunately, her eye being on the man, she didn't notice which porch I came out of. Well, that showed I wasn't inventing the whole story at any rate, because there was my bloke in the muffler. The girl didn't recognize him at all, but that wasn't surprising, because she'd only just entered the old ladies' service. Besides, it wasn't likely the man had anything to do with it, because he was outside with me when the yelling started. My belief is, he was the sort as doesn't care to have his pockets examined too close, and the minute my back was turned he thought he'd be better and more comfortable elsewhere.

"Now there ain't no need" (con-

tinued the policeman), "for me to trouble you, sir, with all them houses what we went into. We made inquiries at the whole lot, from No. 2 to No. 16, and there wasn't one of them had a hall in any ways conformable to what that chap and I saw through the letter-box. Nor there wasn't a soul in 'em could give us any help more than what we'd had already. You see, sir, though it took me a bit o' time telling, it all went very quick. There was the yells; they didn't last beyond a few seconds or so, and before they was finished, we was across the road and inside the porch. Then there was me shouting and knocking; but I hadn't been long at that afore the chap with me looks through the box. Then I has my look inside, for fifteen seconds it might be, and while I'm doing that, my chap's away up the street. Then I runs after him, and then I blows me whistle. The whole thing might take a minute or a minute and a half. Not more.

"Well, sir; by the time we'd been into every house in Merriman's End, I was feeling a bit queer again, I can tell you, and Withers, he was looking queerer. He says to me, 'Burt,' he says, 'is this your idea of a joke? Because if so, the 'Olborn Empire's where you ought to be, not the police force.' So I tells him over again, most solemn, what I seen—'and,' I says, 'if only we could lay hands on that chap in the muffler, he could tell you he seen it,

too.. And what's more,' I says, 'do you think I'd risk me job, playing a silly trick like that?' He says, 'Well, it beats me,' he says. 'If I didn't know you was a sober kind of chap, I'd say you was seein' things.'

"'Things?' I says to him. 'I see that there corpse a-layin' there with the knife in his neck, and that was enough for me. 'Orrible, he looked, and the blood all over the floor.' 'Well,' he says, 'maybe he wasn't dead after all, and they've cleared him out of the way.' 'And cleared the house away too, I suppose,' I said to him. So Withers says, in an odd sort o' voice, 'You're sure about the house? You wasn't letting your imagination run away with you over naked females and such?' That was a nice thing to say. I said, 'No, I wasn't. There's been some monkey business going on in this street and I'm going to get to the bottom of it, if we has to comb out London for that chap in the muffler.' 'Yes,' says Withers, nasty like, 'it's a pity he cleared off so sudden.' 'Well,' I says, 'you can't say I imagined *him*, anyhow, because that there girl saw him, and a mercy she did,' I said, 'or you'd be saying next I ought to be in Colney Hatch.' 'Well,' he says, 'I dunno what you think you're going to do about it. You better ring up the station and ask for instructions.'

"Which I did. And Sergeant Jones, he come down himself, and he listens attentive-like to what we

both has to say, and then he walks along the street, slow-like, from end to end. And then he comes back and says to me, 'Now, Burt,' he says, 'just you describe that hall to me again, careful.' Which I does, same as I described it to you, sir. And he says, 'You're sure there was the room on the left of the stairs with the glass and silver on the table; and the room on the right with the pictures in it?' And I says, 'Yes, Sergeant, I'm quite sure of that.' And Withers says, 'Ah!' in a kind of got-you-now voice, if you take my meaning. And the sergeant says, 'Now, Burt,' he says, 'pull yourself together and take a look at these here houses. Don't you see they're all single-fronted? There ain't one on 'em has rooms *both* sides o' the front hall. Look at the windows, you fool,' he says."

Lord Peter poured out the last of the champagne.

"I don't mind telling you, sir" (went on the policeman), "that I was fair knocked silly. To think of me never noticing that! Withers had noticed it all right, and that's what made him think I was drunk or barmy. But I stuck to what I'd seen. I said; there must be two of them houses knocked into one, somewhere; but that didn't work, because we'd been into all of them, and there wasn't no such thing—not without there was one o' them concealed doors like you read about in crook stories. 'Well, anyhow,' I says to the sergeant, 'the yells was

real all right, because other people heard 'em. Just you ask, and they'll tell you.' So the sergeant says, 'Well, Burt, I'll give you every chance.'

"So he knocks up No. 12 again—not wishing to annoy No. 14 any more than he was already—and this time the son comes down. An agreeable gentleman he was, too; not a bit put out. He says, Oh, yes, he'd heard the yells and his father'd heard them too. 'No. 14,' he says, 'that's where the trouble is. A very odd bloke, is No. 14, and I shouldn't be surprised if he beats that unfortunate servant of his. The Englishman abroad, you know! The outposts of Empire and all that kind of thing. They're rough and ready—and then the curry in them parts is bad for the liver.' So I was for inquiring at No. 14 again; but the sergeant, he loses patience, and says, 'You know quite well,' he says, 'it ain't No. 14, and, in my opinion, Burt, you're either dotty or drunk. You best go home straight away,' he says, 'and sober up, and I'll see you again when you can give a better account of yourself.' So I argues a bit, but it ain't no use, and away he goes, and Withers goes back to his beat. And I walks up and down a bit till Jessop comes to take 'over, and then I comes away, and that's when I sees you, sir.

"But I ain't drunk, sir—at least, I wasn't then, though there do seem to be a kind of a swimming in me head at this moment. Maybe that

stuff's stronger than it tastes. But I wasn't drunk then, and I'm pretty sure I'm not dotty. I'm haunted, sir, that's what it is—haunted. It might be there was someone killed in one of them houses a many years ago, and that's what I see tonight. Perhaps they changed the numbering of the street on account of it—I've heard tell of such things—and when the same night comes round, the house goes back to what it was before. But there I am, with a black mark against me, and it ain't a fair trick for no ghost to go getting a plain man into trouble. And I'm sure, sir, you'll agree with me."

The policeman's narrative had lasted some time, and the hands of the grandfather clock stood at a quarter to five. Peter Wimsey gazed benevolently at his companion, for whom he was beginning to feel a positive affection. He was, if anything, slightly more drunk than the policeman, for he had missed tea and had no appetite for his dinner; but the wine had not clouded his wits; it had only increased excitability and postponed sleep. He said:

"When you looked through the letter-box, could you see any part of the ceiling, or the lights?"

"No, sir; on account, you see, of the flap. I could see right and left and straight forward; but not upwards, and none of the near part of the floor."

"When you looked at the house from outside, there was no light ex-

cept through the fanlight. But when you looked through the flap, all the rooms were lit, right and left and at the back?"

"That's so, sir."

"Are there back doors to the houses?"

"Yes, sir. Coming out of Merri-man's End, you turn to the right, and there's an opening a little way along which takes you to the back doors."

"You seem to have a very distinct visual memory. I wonder if your other kinds of memory are as good. Can you tell me, for instance, whether any of the houses you went into had any particular smell? Especially 10, 12, and 14?"

"Smell, sir?" The policeman closed his eyes to stimulate recollection. "Why, yes, sir. No. 10, where the two ladies live, that had a sort of an old-fashioned smell. I can't put me tongue to it. Not lavender—but something as ladies keeps in bowls and such—rose-leaves and what not. Potpourri, that's the stuff. Potpourri. And No. 12—well, no, there was nothing particular there, except I remember thinking they must keep pretty good servants, though we didn't see anybody except the family. All that floor and paneling was polished beautiful—you could see your face in it. Beeswax and turpentine, I says to meself. And elbow-grease. What you'd call a clean house with a good, clean smell. But No. 14—that was different. I didn't like the

smell of that. Stuff, like as if the servants had been burning some o' that there incense to his idols, maybe."

"Ah!" said Peter. "What you say is very suggestive." He placed his fingertips together and shot his last question over them:

"Ever been inside the National Gallery?"

"No, sir," said the policeman, astonished. "I can't say as I ever was."

"That's London again," said Peter. "We're the last people in the world to know anything of our great metropolitan institutions. Now, what is the best way to tackle this bunch of toughs, I wonder? It's a little early for a call. Still, there's nothing like doing one's good deed before breakfast, and the sooner you're set right with the sergeant, the better. Let me see. Yes—I think that may do it. Costume pieces are not as a rule in my line, but my routine has been so much upset already, one way and another, that an irregularity more or less will hardly matter. Wait here while I have a bath and change. I may be a little time; but it would hardly be decent to get there before six."

The bath had been an attractive thought, but was perhaps ill-advised, for a curious languor stole over him with the touch of the hot water. The champagne was losing its effervescence. It was with an effort that he dragged himself out and reawakened himself with a cold shower.

The matter of dress required a little thought. A pair of gray flannel trousers was easily found, and though they were rather too well creased for the part he meant to play, he thought that with luck they would probably pass unnoticed. The shirt was a difficulty. His collection of shirts was a notable one, but they were mostly of an inconspicuous and gentlemanly sort. He hesitated for some time over a white shirt with an open sports collar, but decided at length upon a blue one, bought as an experiment and held to be not quite successful. A red tie, if he had possessed such a thing, would have been convincing. After some consideration, he remembered that he had seen his wife in a rather wide Liberty tie, whose prevailing color was orange. That, he felt, would do if he could find it. On her it had looked rather well; on him, it would be completely abominable.

He went through into the next room; it was queer to find it empty. A peculiar sensation came over him. Here *he* was, rifling his wife's drawers, and there *she* was, spirited out of reach at the top of the house with a couple of nurses and an entirely new baby, which might turn into goodness knew what. He sat down before the glass and stared at himself. He felt as though he ought to have changed somehow in the night; but he only looked unshaven and, he thought, a trifle intoxicated. Both were quite good things

to look at the moment, though hardly suitable for the father of a family. He pulled out all the drawers in the dressing-table; they emitted vaguely familiar smells of face-powder and handkerchief sachet. He tried the big built-in wardrobe: frocks, costumes, and trays full of underwear, which made him feel sentimental. At last he struck a promising vein of gloves and stockings. The next tray held ties, the orange of the desired Liberty creation gleaming in a friendly way among them. He put it on, and observed with pleasure that the effect was Bohemian beyond description.

He wandered out again, leaving all the drawers open behind him as though a burglar had passed through the room. An ancient tweed jacket of his own, of a very countrified pattern, suitable only for fishing in Scotland, was next unearthed, together with a pair of brown canvas shoes. He secured his trousers by a belt, searched for and found an old soft-brimmed felt hat of no recognizable color, and, after removing a few trout-flies from the hat-band and tucking his shirt-sleeves well up inside the coat-sleeve, decided that he would do. As an afterthought, he returned to his wife's room and selected a wide woolen scarf in a shade of greenish blue. Thus equipped, he came downstairs again, to find P. C. Burt fast asleep, with his mouth open and snoring.

Peter was hurt. Here he was, sac-

rificing himself in the interests of this policeman, and the man hadn't the common decency to appreciate it. However, there was no point in waking him yet. He yawned horribly and sat down. . . .

It was the footman who wakened the sleepers at half-past six. If he was surprised to see his master, very strangely attired, slumbering in the hall in company with a large policeman, he was too well trained to admit the fact even to himself. He merely removed the tray. The faint clink of glass roused Peter, who slept like a cat at all times.

"Hullo, William," he said. "Have I overslept myself? What's the time?"

"Five and twenty to seven, my lord."

"Just about right." He remembered that the footman slept on the top floor. "All quiet on the Western Front, William?"

"Not altogether quiet, my lord." William permitted himself a slight smile. "The young master was lively about five. But all satisfactory, I gather from Nurse Jenkyn."

"Nurse Jenkyn? Is that the young one? Don't let yourself be run away with, William. I say, just give P. C. Burt a light prod in the ribs, would you? He and I have business together."

In Merriman's End, the activities of the morning were beginning. The milkman came jingling out of the cul-de-sac; lights were twinkling in upper rooms; hands were

withdrawing curtains; in front of No. 10, the housemaid was already scrubbing the steps. Peter posted his policeman at the top of the street.

"I don't want to make my first appearance with official accompaniment," he said. "Come along when I beckon. What, by the way, is the name of the agreeable gentleman in No. 12? I think he may be of some assistance to us."

"Mr. O'Halloran, sir."

The policeman looked at Peter expectantly. He seemed to have abandoned all initiative and to place implicit confidence in this hospitable and eccentric gentleman. Peter slouched down the street with his hands in his trousers pockets and his shabby hat pulled rakishly over his eyes. At No. 12 he paused and examined the windows. Those on the ground floor were open; the house was awake. He marched up the steps, took a brief glance through the flap of the letter-box, and rang the bell. A maid in a neat blue dress and white cap and apron opened the door.

"Good morning," said Peter, slightly raising the shabby hat; "is Mr. O'Halloran in?" He gave the r a soft continental roll. "Not the old gentleman. I mean young Mr. O'Halloran?"

"He's in," said the maid, doubtfully, "but he isn't up yet."

"Oh!" said Peter. "Well, it is a little early for a visit. But I desire to see him urgently. I am—there is

a little trouble where I live. Could you entreat him—would you be so kind? I have walked all the way,” he added, pathetically; and with perfect truth.

“Have you, sir?” said the maid. She added kindly, “You do look tired, sir, and that’s a fact.”

“It is nothing,” said Peter. “It is only that I forgot to have any dinner. But if I can see Mr. O’Halaran it will be all right.”

“You’d better come in, sir,” said the maid. “I’ll see if I can wake him.” She conducted the exhausted stranger in and offered him a chair. “What name shall I say, sir?”

“Petrovinsky,” said his lordship, hardily. As he had rather expected, neither the unusual name nor the unusual clothes of this unusually early visitor seemed to cause very much surprise. The maid left him in the tidy little paneled hall and went upstairs without so much as a glance at the umbrella stand.

Left to himself, Peter sat still, noticing that the hall was remarkably bare of furniture, and was lit by a single electric pendant almost immediately inside the front door. The letter-box was the usual wire-cage, the bottom of which had been carefully lined with brown paper. From the back of the house came a smell of frying bacon.

Presently there was the sound of somebody running downstairs. A young man appeared in a dressing-gown. He called out as he came: “Is that you, Stefan? Your name

came up as Mr. Whiskey. Has Marfa run away again, or— What the hell? Who the devil are you, sir?”

“Wimsey,” said Peter, mildly, “not Whiskey; Wimsey the policeman’s friend. I just looked in to congratulate you on a mastery of the art of false perspective which I thought had perished with the ingenious Van Hoogstraaten, or at least with Grace and Lambelet.”

“Oh!” said the young man. He had a pleasant countenance, with humorous eyes and ears pointed like a faun’s. He laughed a little ruefully. “I suppose my beautiful murder is out. It was too good to last. Those bobbies! I hope to God they gave No. 14 a bad night. May I ask you how you come to be involved in the matter?”

“I,” said Peter, “am the kind of person in whom distressed constables confide—I cannot imagine why. And when I had the picture of that sturdy blue-clad figure, led so persuasively by a Bohemian stranger and invited to peer through a hole, I was irresistibly transported in mind to the National Gallery. Many a time have I squinted sideways through those holes into the little black box, and admired that Dutch interior of many vistas painted so convincingly on the four flat sides of the box. How right you were to preserve your eloquent silence! Your Irish brogue would have given you away. The servants, I gather, were purposely kept out of sight.”

"Tell me," said Mr. O'Halloran, seating himself sideways upon the hall table, "do you know by heart the occupation of every resident in this quarter of London? I do not paint under my own name."

"No," said Peter. "Like the good Dr. Watson, the constable could observe, though he could not reason from his observation, it was the smell of turpentine that betrayed you. I gather that at his first call the apparatus was not far off."

"It was folded together and lying under the stairs," replied the painter. "It has since been removed to the studio. My father had only just had time to get it out of the way and hitch down the 'No. 13' from the fanlight before the police reinforcements arrived. He had not even time to put back this table I am sitting on; a brief search would have discovered it in the dining-room. My father is a remarkable sportsman; I cannot too highly recommend the presence of mind he displayed while I was haring round the houses and leaving him to hold the fort. It would have been so simple and so unenterprising to explain; but my father, being an Irishman, enjoys treading on the coat-tails of authority."

"I should like to meet your father. The only thing I do not thoroughly understand is the reason of this elaborate plot. Were you by any chance executing a burglary round the corner, and keeping the police in play while you did it?"

"I never thought of that," said the young man, with regret in his voice. "No. The bobby was not the predestined victim. He happened to be present at a full-dress rehearsal, and the joke was too good to be lost. The fact is, my uncle is Sir Lucius Preston, the R.A."

"Ah!" said Peter. "The light begins to break."

"My own style of draftsmanship," pursued Mr. O'Halloran, "is modern. My uncle has on several occasions informed me that I draw like that only because I do not know how to draw. The idea was that he should be invited to dinner tomorrow and regaled with a story of the mysterious 'No. 13,' said to appear from time to time in this street and to be haunted by strange noises. Having thus detained him till close upon midnight, I should have set out to see him to the top of the street. As we went along, the cries would have broken out. I should have led him back—"

"Nothing," said Peter, "could be clearer. After the preliminary shock he would have been forced to confess that your draftsmanship was a triumph of academic accuracy."

"I hope," said Mr. O'Halloran, "the performance may still go forward as originally intended." He looked at Peter, who replied:

"I hope so, indeed. I also hope that your uncle's heart is a strong one. But may I, in the meantime, signal to my unfortunate policeman and relieve his mind? He is

in danger of losing his promotion, through a suspicion that he was drunk on duty."

"Good God!" said Mr. O'Halloran. "No—I don't want that to happen. Fetch him in."

The difficulty was to make P. C. Burt recognize in the daylight what he had seen by night through the letter-flap. Of the framework of painted canvas, with its forms and figures oddly foreshortened and distorted, he could make little. Only when the thing was set up and lighted in the curtained studio was he at length reluctantly convinced.

"It's wonderful," he said. "It's like Maskelyne and Devant. I wish

the sergeant could a-see it."

"Lure him down here tomorrow night," said Mr. O'Halloran. "Let him come as my uncle's body guard. You—" he turned to Peter—"you seem to have a way with policemen. Can't you inveigle the fellow along? Your impersonation of starving and disconsolate Bloomsbury is fully as convincing as mine. How about it?"

"I don't know," said Peter. "The costume gives me pain. Besides, is it kind to a poor policeman? I give you the R.A., but when it comes to the guardian of the law—Blast it all! I'm a family man, and I must have *some* sense of responsibility."



O. Henry

After Twenty Years

A little gem from THE FOUR MILLION—about a man who came two thousand miles to keep a twenty-year appointment—by one of America's greatest talespinners . . .

THE POLICEMAN ON THE BEAT moved up the avenue impressively. The impressiveness was habitual and not for show, for spectators were few. The time was barely ten o'clock at night, but chilly gusts of wind with a taste of rain in them had well nigh depeopled the streets.

Trying doors as he went, twirling his club with many intricate and artful movements, turning now and then to cast his watchful eye down the pacific thoroughfare, the officer, with his stalwart form and slight swagger, made a fine picture of a guardian of the peace. The vicinity was one that kept early hours. Now and then you might see the lights of a cigar store or of an all-night lunch counter; but the majority of the doors belonged to business places that had long since been closed.

When about midway of a certain block the policeman suddenly slowed his walk. In the doorway of a darkened hardware store a man leaned, with an unlighted cigar in his mouth. As the policeman

walked up to him the man spoke up quickly.

"It's all right, officer," he said reassuringly. "I'm just waiting for a friend. It's an appointment made twenty years ago. Sounds a little funny to you, doesn't it? Well, I'll explain if you'd like to make certain it's all straight. About that long ago there used to be a restaurant where this store stands—'Big Joe' Brady's restaurant."

"Until five years ago," said the policeman. "It was torn down then."

The man in the doorway struck a match and lit his cigar. The light showed a pale, square-jawed face with keen eyes, and a little white scar near his right eyebrow. His scarfpin was a large diamond, oddly set.

"Twenty years ago tonight," said the man, "I dined here at 'Big Joe' Brady's with Jimmy Wells, my best chum, and the finest chap in the world. He and I were raised here in New York, just like two brothers, together. I was eighteen and Jimmy was twenty. The next morning I

was to start for the West to make my fortune. You couldn't have dragged Jimmy out of New York; he thought it was the only place on earth. Well, we agreed that night that we would meet here again exactly twenty years from that date and time, no matter what our conditions might be or from what distance we might have to come. We figured that in twenty years each of us ought to have our destiny worked out and our fortunes made, whatever they were going to be."

"It sounds pretty interesting," said the policeman. "Rather a long time between meets, though, it seems to me. Haven't you heard from your friend since you left?"

"Well, yes, for a time we corresponded," said the other. "But after a year or two we lost track of each other. You see, the West is a pretty big proposition, and I kept hustling around over it pretty lively. But I know Jimmy will meet me here if he's alive, for he always was the truest, staunchest old chap in the world. He'll never forget. I came two thousand miles to stand in this door tonight, and it's worth it if my old partner turns up."

The waiting man pulled out a handsome watch, the lids of it set with small diamonds.

"Three minutes to ten," he announced. "It was exactly ten o'clock when we parted here at the restaurant door."

"Did pretty well out West, didn't

you?" asked the policeman.

"You bet! I hope Jimmy has done half as well. He was a kind of plodder, though, good fellow as he was. I've had to compete with some of the sharpest wits going to get my pile. A man gets in a groove in New York. It takes the West to put a razor-edge on him."

The policeman twirled his club and took a step or two.

"I'll be on my way. Hope your friend comes around all right. Going to call time on him sharp?"

"I should say not!" said the other. "I'll give him half an hour at least. If Jimmy is alive on earth he'll be here by that time. So long, officer."

"Good night, sir," said the policeman, passing along on his beat, trying doors as he went.

There was now a fine, cold drizzle falling, and the wind had risen from its uncertain puffs into a steady blow. The few foot passengers astir in that quarter hurried dismally and silently along with coat collars turned high and pocketed hands. And in the door of the hardware store the man who had come two thousand miles to fill an appointment, uncertain almost to absurdity, with the friend of his youth, smoked his cigar and waited.

About twenty minutes he waited, and then a tall man in a long overcoat, with collar turned up to his ears, hurried across from the opposite side of the street. He went di-

rectly to the waiting man.

"Is that you, Bob?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Is that you, Jimmy Wells?" cried the man in the door.

"Bless my heart!" exclaimed the new arrival, grasping both the other's hands with his own. "It's Bob, sure as fate. I was certain I'd find you here if you were still in existence. Well, well, well!—twenty years is a long time. The old restaurant's gone, Bob. I wish it had lasted, so we could have had another dinner there. How has the West treated you, old man?"

"Bully; it has given me everything I asked it for. You've changed lots, Jimmy. I never thought you were so tall by two or three inches."

"Oh, I grew a bit after I was twenty."

"Doing well in New York, Jimmy?"

"Moderately. I have a position in one of the city departments. Come on, Bob; we'll go around to a place I know of, and have a good long talk about old times."

The two men started up the street, arm in arm. The man from the West, his egotism enlarged by success, was beginning to outline the history of his career. The other, submerged in his overcoat, listened with interest.

At the corner stood a drug store,

brilliant with electric lights. When they came into this glare each of them turned simultaneously to gaze on the other's face.

The man from the West stopped suddenly and released his arm.

"You're not Jimmy Wells," he snapped. "Twenty years is a long time but not long enough to change a man's nose from a Roman to a pug."

"It sometimes changes a good man into a bad one," said the tall man. "You've been under arrest for ten minutes, 'Silky' Bob. Chicago thinks you may have dropped over our way and wires us she wants to have a chat with you. Going quietly, are you? That's sensible. Now, before we go to the station here's a note I was asked to hand you. You may read it here at the window. It's from Patrolman Wells."

The man from the West unfolded the little piece of paper handed him. His hand was steady when he began to read, but it trembled a little by the time he had finished. The note was rather short.

Bob: I was at the appointed place on time. When you struck the match to light your cigar I saw it was the face of the man wanted in Chicago. Somehow I couldn't do it myself, so I went around and got a plainclothes man to do the job.

Jimmy.

Lord Dunsany

A Simple Matter of Deduction

In which Mr. Linley, the detective of Lord Dunsany's masterpiece, "The Two Bottles of Relish," matches the sharpness and shrewdness of Sherlock Holmes himself in a criminological coup in the grandest of 'tec traditions . . . As Smithers, that admirable modern-day "Watson," says: "It was all pure magic to me" . . .

YES," SAID SMITHERS, "MR. LINLEY is a wonderful man."

Smithers was being interviewed by a man from *The Daily Rumour*, who would far sooner have interviewed Linley. But Linley would not talk about himself, and so they had gone to Smithers.

"I understand that you lived in the same flat with him," said the journalist.

"That's right," said Smithers. "I did for a couple of years."

"And what was the most remarkable case in which he took part?" asked the interviewer, a young man of the name of Ribbert.

"I couldn't say that," said Smithers. "I've seen so many of them."

"You've told us of some."

"Well, I have," said Smithers.

"Are there any that you haven't told us about?" asked Ribbert.

"Well, yes," said Smithers. "There was the case of Mr. Ebright, who was lured to an empty house by a telephone call, and there murdered. You could find an empty

house before the war, if you looked for it; and this man had found his way in—through a window at the back; the police said—and had lured Mr. Ebright there somehow, and was waiting for him when he came. You may remember the case."

"I think I do," said the journalist.

"There were no clues in it," Smithers went on, "no clues at all; not what you would really call clues. And that was what brought the detective in charge of the case to Mr. Linley, and that is why you might call it one of his cleverest bits of work. The detective thought Mr. Linley might help him, because he was Inspector Ulton who had been helped by Mr. Linley before. I was there at the time, when Inspector Ulton came in, and after they'd said Howdydo, he says to Mr. Linley, 'There's a case with a certain amount of mystery about it, and we thought that you might perhaps have an idea that would help us. . . .'"

"What are the facts?" asks Mr. Linley.

"There are very few of them," says the Inspector. "It's a case of murder."

I was surprised to hear him say that, because it's a word that Inspector Ulton never seemed to like to use. But he used it this time. "He was killed with a hammer or some such object," Inspector Ulton says. "His skull was battered in, and the hammer, or whatever it was, had been cleaned on a bit of newspaper. The body wasn't found until two days later, so that the murderer got a good start. We know it was, premeditated murder, not only because the dead man, Mr. Ebright, was lured there by a telephone call, but because there are no fingerprints except his in the whole house. And that means the murderer must have been wearing gloves all the time, even when he was doing a crossword puzzle, which is the only thing besides the sheet of bloody newspaper that had been left in the room in which the dead man was lying—a bare room in an unoccupied house in a little street near Sydenham."

"How do you know that it was the murderer who worked on the crossword puzzle?" asks Mr. Linley.

"Because he would have been doing it while he was waiting for the other man to come," says Inspector Ulton. "He must have got there first so as to let Mr. Ebright in."

"Yes, that is so," Mr. Linley says. "Could you let me see the puzzle?"

"It's only an ordinary one," says Inspector Ulton, "and all the letters are done in capitals, which give us no clue to his handwriting."

"Still, I would like to take a look."

And Inspector Ulton takes an envelope out of his pocket and pulls out a torn sheet of newspaper. "There it is," he says. "No fingerprints."

And there was the crossword puzzle, nearly all filled in.

"He must have waited for a long time for his victim," says Mr. Linley.

"We thought of that," says the Inspector. "But it didn't get us any further."

"I think the crossword puzzle will."

"The puzzle?" says the Inspector.

"I don't know," says Mr. Linley. "Let me look at it."

And he looks at it for quite a long while. And then he says to Inspector Ulton, "Who did it?" Which seemed odd to me at the time. But he explained to me afterwards that they usually know at Scotland Yard who has committed a murder, but that what they want to know is how to prove it. But Inspector Ulton only says, "We don't know."

And then Mr. Linley asks, "What was the motive?"

"Ah," says Inspector Ulton, "if I could tell you that, we wouldn't

need to trouble you. The motive would lead us to the man like a foot-track. But there's no motive and no clue, or none that has come our way."

And Mr. Linley goes on looking at the crossword puzzle, and Inspector Ulton says, "What do you make of it?"

"A friend of his," says Mr. Linley. Which was hardly the right word to use of somebody who had murdered him. But that was Mr. Linley's way of putting things.

"A friend?"

"Someone of his acquaintance," says Mr. Linley. "Or he couldn't have lured him into that deserted house."

But that was getting nobody any forrarder. For Inspector Ulton says, "We had thought of that, and had gone carefully over the list of all the people he knew. But the trouble is there are seventy-five of them. It would be one of those, as you say. But we can't very well put seventy-five men on trial."

"No," says Mr. Linley. "The dock couldn't hold them all."

But one could see that Inspector Ulton didn't think that very funny. And then Mr. Linley goes on. "But I think I can whittle them down a bit for you. To begin with, he has one of those new fountain pens that will write for weeks on end without refilling them. Not quite everybody has one. So that reduces your list by two or three. And then he would have sent it to be refilled

about the time of the murder, which reduces it a good deal further."

I saw that he must have got that from the crossword puzzle. But after that it was all pure magic to me. For he goes on, "And I fancy he is a man who has a garden. I should say a fairly good one. And then he lives among chess players, though he doesn't play himself. And he is not without education, but was never at Eton or any similar school. And he has a gun and probably lives near a river or marshes."

"But wait a moment!" says Inspector Ulton. "How do you know all this?"

"And one thing more. He knows something about geology."

And all the time he was holding this bit of a sheet of paper in his hand and glancing now and then at the crossword puzzle. I couldn't make head or tail of it, and I don't think Inspector Ulton could either. And then Mr. Linley begins to explain. "You see, we begin with his seventy-five friends—because it isn't a casual burglar trying to rob him. A man doesn't go to meet a stranger like that with jewelry on him; or with money either, unless he is going to pay blackmail. And if he's going to pay blackmail, there's no need to murder him. No, it was one of your seventy-five. And you see the track of his pen?"

"Yes, I see that."

"And you see where it began to

give out at the third word and could hardly manage the fourth? So he gave it up and went on with a pencil."

"Yes, I see that too."

"Well," says Mr. Linley, "there are words in a crossword puzzle that you get helped to by the letters of words you have done already, but the ones a man puts in first are the ones he knows. Now look at these, Inspector. The first two clues that he went for, which are not nearly the first in the crossword, are *Four of thirty-two* and *A kind of duck*. Those are the two that he picked to do first. And he puts in *Rooks* and *Shoveller*."

"Two birds," says the Inspector.

"No," says Mr. Linley, "the second is a bird, and the kind of bird not likely to be much known except among shooting men, and not always by them unless they live by muddy places in which the shoveller feeds. But rooks are what chess players call what the rest of us call castles. But though he is familiar with the correct name for them he doesn't play chess, for he has missed a very easy clue in five letters, *Starts on her own colour*. He would never hear chess players talking about that, because it is too elementary. But he can't be a chess player himself if he doesn't know that that refers to the Queen.

"And the third one he picks out," Mr. Linley goes on, "is *London's clays and gravels*. And he writes down *Eocene*. Which is quite right.

But not everybody knows that, and it seems to make him a bit of a geologist. And then we come to his fourth effort, when his fountain pen gave its last gasp. The clue to that is *A classical splendor of the greenhouse*. And he gets that one at once, or at any rate it's his fourth choice, without any letters to help him. And that is why I say he is not without education, because he must have known something of Horace to get that word, and must know something about a glasshouse, and I should say a well-kept one, which makes him a bit of a gardener. *Amaryllis* is the word that he has written in."

"Why, that narrows it down a lot."

"Yes," says Mr. Linley. "We have now got a sporting friend of Mr. Ebright—if one can use the word friend, and if one can use the word sporting—who has probably quite a nice garden, and either a knowledge of geology or else he lives on those very clays and gravels and so knows their correct name, and also he is an educated man. Now among Mr. Ebright's educated friends several would have been at Eton, Winchester, or Harrow. But you can eliminate all of them because of a staring gap in this puzzle. Number 9 down, you see. It says *Long, short, short* (six letters). If he can't get that he has certainly never been at Eton. The simple answer is *Dactyl*—simple to anyone who has ever had to do Latin

verses. And, indeed, you would get that much at a private school."

And I put in a suggestion then. "Mightn't Mr. Ebright have come in," I said, "and interrupted him?"

"He might have," said Mr. Linley, "but he had done all except three or four, and that Number 9 is one of the very first you would expect him to pick, if he knew anything about it, because it is so easy."

"Well, I think you have helped us wonderfully," says the Inspector.

"And I think we might follow his preferences a little further," goes on Mr. Linley, "though that will not be so easy. He was using a soft pencil and it was soon blunted, and I think we may allow him some knowledge of entomology, because he wrote this in while his pencil was still sharp, without the help of any letters from words that cross it, for they are more blurred and the pencil was pressed much harder."

And Mr. Linley showed us the word *Vanessa*, and the clue to it, which was *The family of the peacock*.

"With a magnifying glass," went on Mr. Linley, "we might get some more. But perhaps you have enough when we have identified the murderer as a man acquainted with Mr. Ebright, who probably owns a garden, was educated, but not at Eton, knows geology, or lives on the London clays or gravels, is associated in some way with chess players and yet does not play, and

has at one time or another collected butterflies. If you don't actually place him from that, it will at any rate remove suspicion from the majority of your other seventy-five suspects.

"And sure enough it did. There weren't as many as half of them who had gardens. Only twenty of these turned out to have had a classical education and of those twenty, five had been at Eton. Of the fifteen remaining, only half a dozen knew anything of geology, and only two of those had ever collected butterflies, and one of them was found to have two nephews who often stayed with him on their vacations from Cambridge and were good chess players. And he did not play.

"All that was found out by Inspector Ulton and Scotland Yard, and it was a lot to find out. And they even found out that he had sent his pen to be refilled about the time Mr. Linley said. And they arrested their man, and he was tried. But the jury didn't feel that you could quite hang a man on the evidence of a crossword puzzle, and the verdict was 'Not Guilty.'"

"Then he is still going about!" said the journalist.

"Yes, when last I heard of him," said Smithers. "But I don't think there's any harm in him now. It was a near thing and it frightened him, and I don't think he'll try it again. You see, Mr. Linley nearly had him."

Francis Iles (Anthony Berkeley)

The Coward

A perfect example of Francis Iles's forte—a story of crime rather than of detection, a story that is not a “crime-puzzle pure and simple,” that holds its readers “less by mathematical than by psychological ties,” that is “a puzzle of character rather than a puzzle of time, place, motive, and opportunity”—or to put it another way, not a mere whodunit, howdunit, whydunit, whendunit, wheredunit, or could-have-dunit . . .

THIS IS THE STORY THAT WAS TOLD me by a complete stranger one wet morning at the Dodo Club.

I do not know what the qualifications are for membership of the Dodo, but I believe the club was founded as a kind of carry-over on a permanent basis of one of those ephemeral clublets which contribute so much to the charm of social life at the older universities. At any rate, most of the members were youngish—that is to say, on the undeveloped side of 40—their number was small, and, according to George Pidcock, each of them was a distinguished man in some modest way of his own; though what claim to distinction George himself could have put forward, beyond being a first cousin of mine, I could never imagine.

In any case, it was to lunch with George that I was there on that morning, and it was because the day was wet that I arrived more

than an hour early. The hall porter at the Dodo knows me; and the morning room into which they show visitors is well provided with those more obscure periodicals (to be seen only in clubs) which have a peculiar fascination for me; therefore, I looked forward to quite a pleasant hour of relaxation before the exacting job of being entertained by George for lunch.

But I was out of luck—all my favorite magazines were missing.

I must have vented my chagrin aloud, for the next moment I was horrified to see an inquiring head come into view round the wing of an armchair and fix on me the usual baleful eye of the Disturbed Member.

“Were you looking for anything?” asked the head.

“No,” I said. “No, no. Not at all. Nothing. Oh, no.”

He got up and I saw with incredulity that his eye was not bale-

ful at all but concerned, with the concern of a host for a guest. "I'm really afraid you were looking for something. What was it?"

"Retrogressional Advancement," I said.

With a peculiarly attractive look of guilt he indicated the copy in his own hand. "I'm so sorry," he was beginning, when suddenly his expression changed and he looked quite startled. "Good Lord, are you really a Retrogressional Advancer? They positively do exist, then? 'Pon my word, I thought the whole thing must be a leg-pull. I say, I didn't mean that. Of course . . . most extraordinarily interesting. . . . Quite see there may be something in it. . . . H'm . . ."

I put him out of his agony.

And then, of course, he ordered sherry, and asked whom I was waiting for, ordered more sherry on hearing that it was George Pidcock, confessed to never having heard of George Pidcock, and finally ordered more sherry as a penance for never having heard of me either. In short, within a very short time we were getting ready to tell each other the stories of our lives: which for two complete strangers, and members of a normally reticent race, was remarkable enough.

It was, however, not until he learned that I was a writer that this excellent man began to show signs of human weakness. They were signs I knew too well. I had fled from them at cocktail parties, at

week-end parties, in the homes even of elderly relatives. They are indications that the sign-maker has a "plot" for a story: either "just a little thing, you probably won't think much of it, came to me in my bath this morning," or "and absolutely true, you'd hardly need to alter it; honestly, someone ought to write it up."

Usually, I say, the only thing to do is to flee (unless you happen to be particularly good at the glassy smile, the mandarin nod, and all the rest of it); but this time things were different. After all, this man had not read me the riot act, as he had been entitled to do; instead he had fed me with kindness and gladdened me with sherry. Besides, I liked his looks. So I did as never before since the days of my apprenticeship: I encouraged him.

Curiously, it needed encouragement to bring his tale out of him. When it came to the point, he showed diffidence. I encouraged him further.

"No, no," he said. "It's not that. I was just wondering whether I haven't been a bit—what's the word?—precipitate. After all, it's rather . . . What's the word again? I'm afraid you'll think me only half-educated. I suppose *you* can hit on the right word every time."

I assured him I could not.

"Well, 'confidential,' then. No, not 'confidential.' 'Intimate,' that's more like it. Yes, it's a bit intimate.

Rather gives a fellow away, I mean. Not that the . . . the chap who told me put me under any injunction not to repeat it. I mean, there's no seal of secrecy, but . . . Anyhow, I tell you what I'll do. I'll tell you the story exactly as it happened . . . that is, as it was told to me, of course . . . and if it's any use to you, it's up to you to twist things round a bit so that it's not too absolutely obvious. How's that?"

"Fair enough," I said. "And you must give your informant a fictitious name, mustn't you?"

"By Jove, yes. That's an idea. Of course I must. I say, that's worth a couple more sherries, don't you think?" He got up and rang the bell. "Smith! That's what we'll call him. Smith, yes. Jolly good. Smith! Well, it was in the last war. About the middle of the war. This chap Smith had got a spot of leave. He was a young subaltern then in . . . Oh, well, better not mention his regiment, but his battalion was quartered at the time in one of the more deadly regions of Yorkshire; and believe me, Yorkshire lover as I am, some bits can be grim."

"I've been stationed in Catterick Camp myself," I told him.

"Ah, well, you can sympathize with Smith. You see, his leave came at just the wrong time. He was engaged to a girl in London . . . grand girl and all that, much too good for him (so Smith says, of course!) . . . but she was some

sort of big noise in the W.R.N.S. and was going to be up to the eyebrows in it all that week; couldn't give the poor chap two minutes in all his eight days.

"So what do you think the poor boob did? He went to Brighton. You see, he'd got some pretty good memories of Brighton, before the war. For instance . . . Oh, well, no need to go into that. Point is, he went to Brighton. And, believe me, to go to Brighton in wartime was asking for trouble. Well . . . he got it.

"He put up at the good old Cosmopolitan, and there wasn't anything wrong with *that*, except that all the waiters were 90 years old and could only just about crawl on their hands and knees, and the food restrictions were too much even for their chef, and the fuel orders left the place freezing, and he was about the only guest in the whole blessed mausoleum. But outside it really was . . . Well, poor old Smith could hardly recognize the place as Brighton at all. Dead, damned, and deserted. A few giddy whirls of barbed wire along the front, practically all the hotels and boarding houses closed, not a sign of life in the place, nothing but rain, wind, and general misery, and all the general foulness of an early English spring.

"I mean, you can see this chap Smith looking out of his hotel bedroom (the lounge being too cold to sit in), over a gray sea, with

the gulls screeching dismally past his window and Smith feeling he could screech with them and wondering what the blazes had made him come to such a godforsaken place and how the blazes he was going to stick it for six more whole days. Ever see Brighton during the war, when the restrictions were on? Well, believe me, it was a bit grim. Poor old Brighton!

"Anyhow, there's always the pictures. So Smith put on his greatcoat and went downstairs to get hold of a local paper and find out what was on. And, of course, when he did find the list, there wasn't a film that he hadn't seen before—and thought pretty poorly of when he did see it! That was how it would be, of course. It was that sort of leave.

"So Smith fell back on the last resource of the utterly bored. He read the local paper. And when he'd read what there was to read, dash it if he didn't read the advertisements, too. I mean, you can judge what his state was by then. So when he saw a rather amusing advertisement in that local rag, you'll understand that he was just about in the right frame of mind to do something about it.

"So far as I can remember . . . I mean, so far as I remember Smith's words, the advertisement went something like this: 'Young Lady has Sporting Prints for Sale. Number Something-or-other Such-and-such Street.' Something like that.

"Now for some reason this made Smith prick his ears up. It sounded . . . Well, why 'sporting prints'? And why go out of the way to rub in 'young lady'? Smith couldn't help feeling there was something queer about it. And he remembered there's some kind of American joke about 'etchings'; never been able to make out quite what it is, but you find it in any American comic paper you pick up. The more he turned it over, the more it seemed to him that this young lady, with her sporting prints, ought to be investigated. Of course, there wasn't a thought of disloyalty to his fiancée. Smith, understand, was an ordinarily decent chap. Besides, he knew she couldn't help not being available: duty before devotion, and all that. But just a pleasant chat or so, and perhaps a personable face to share a bit of war food with . . . there couldn't be any harm in that. So he grabbed his cap and left. I can tell you, he was in the mood.

"Well, he found the street all right, and Smith didn't think it was much of a street for a young lady to live in; a sort of mixture of cheap little shops, cheap boarding houses, and pubs. The number given in the advertisement didn't impress Smith either. At first he thought it was a tobacconist's shop. Then he saw there was a side door, half-open to show a glimpse of a flight of dark, steep, and rather dirty stairs. Evidently the young

lady lived in the maisonette above the shop, and Smith was beginning to wonder if she were really a very nice young lady.

"He didn't care much for the occupant of the shop, either. In fact, it gave him quite a nasty jar, as he was hesitating outside the door, to see a fat little man squatting behind the counter like . . . like a kind of obscene frog, you know, and watching him with beady, bright eyes that never winked. I mean, it quite put Smith off his stroke. Perhaps he had a bit of a guilty conscience already. I don't know. Anyhow . . .

"Smith had one queer—what's the word?—foible, I think. I mean, if there was anything he didn't like, or that frightened him, he . . . well, he sort of went for it bald-headed. You know . . . without giving himself time to think. It was a form of funk really, though Smith didn't know it then. Anyhow, that's what he did."

My stranger paused and sipped his sherry. In his eyes was a curious look which I couldn't quite define.

"Smith went up those stairs?" I prompted him, for I was eager to know.

"Oh, yes, Smith went up those stairs." He smiled. "There was the usual wooden partition of the converted maisonette at the top; you know—before you reach the landing, so that you have to ring the bell from a stair below. Very awkward, I always think. Anyhow,

Smith rang—and waited. He was really quite a bit excited now, you'll understand. Those 'sporting prints' were looking even more significant to him now that he'd seen the young lady's surroundings than they had in the lounge of the Cosmopolitan. And he was excited because he wasn't used to this sort of thing—I mean, calling on strange 'young ladies' in dingy maisonnettes. It was definitely an Adventure, with a capital A.

"After a time he heard a door open inside, and then the flap of the letter box was lifted and a girl's voice said, 'Who is it?'

"Smith explained hurriedly that he'd called in answer to the advertisement, and there was a pause. Then the girl inside said, 'Oh! Well . . . I'm just having a bath. Could you possibly come back in about half an hour?'

"I told you Smith was a bit young in those days. It didn't occur to him to offer to help with the bath, or get the towels warm, or anything. He just said he'd be delighted to come back in half an hour, and went downstairs again like a little gentleman. As a matter of fact, he was thinking what a charming voice it had been. He hadn't really expected that, and it put an edge on his curiosity. He wouldn't have missed his return visit now for wild horses.

"He stopped at the street door to light a cigarette, and noticed that the fat, little man wasn't in his

shop; and for some reason that pleased him. It would have looked as if the girl had turned him down, you see, and he didn't like the idea of the little frog chuckling over that.

"Well, Smith went out and took a walk. Then, when his half-hour was up, he wasted no time in getting back—and his keenness hadn't lost anything by the delay.

"It was past shop hours by now, and Smith noticed as he passed that the tobacconist had closed his shop; he was glad those beady eyes wouldn't follow him again. He positively jumped up those stairs in spite of the darkness, and you can be pretty sure that by this time Smith wasn't nearly so bored with Brighton as he had been.

"At the top of the stairs he pulled out his cigarette lighter to find the bell, and then he noticed a queer thing: the door wasn't closed. Still, he couldn't walk in, of course, so he rang. No reply. He rang again. Still no reply. Then he wondered: was it possible that the girl had had to run out for a few minutes, and had left the door ajar especially for him?

"Now, I ought to tell you—you'll find out soon enough in any case—that this chap Smith was rather a timid sort of cove. I mean, hated doing the wrong thing, or shoving himself forward, or making himself conspicuous in any way. Feeble, of course, but there you are; that's how he was. So it took quite a bit

of self-jolting before he could make up his mind to barge in through that open doorway and go on up the next flight of stairs.

"Probably it was only the thought of that cold, windy front, and the hardly less cold and drafty lounge at the Cosmopolitan, that finally made up his mind for him. Like a good few of us, perhaps, Smith loved Adventures with capital A's in theory but not quite so well in practice. Not an enterprising sort of bloke, you understand. Didn't pretend to be.

"Well, he didn't shut the door behind him, just pushed it to, much as it had been. The landing light above was on, but it was too dim to show beyond the door. The landing at the top of the stairs was furnished like a little hall. Smith hesitated there and gave a hoarse sort of croak, but there was no answer. There were two doors opening on to the landing, and one of them was ajar, with the light on inside it. So Smith sidled in."

My friend paused and sipped again; and this time I was careful to say nothing which might break his thread. His face, when he continued, was expressionless.

"It was a nice room. Quite large, but furnished to give an effect of solid coziness; shaded lights, big armchairs, and all that. I believe there was . . . I believe Smith said there was a divan, too: it was the sort of room where there would be a divan, and lots of cushions on

it, too. But *not* a doll over the telephone. No, decidedly not dolls.

"The room brought Smith up with rather a jerk. It wasn't the kind of room he had been expecting, you see. He had expected dolls. He stood irresolute just inside the door, wondering whether he hadn't better make a bolt for it while the going was good. He was pretty sure now that he had done the wrong thing.

"Then something caught his eye: a portfolio lying on a little rosewood table. His brain went click! 'Sporting prints!'

"Well, of course, Smith *had* done the right thing. And, of course, he'd known all the time really what those 'sporting prints' would be. He'd just deliberately been kidding himself, because if the advertisement had said 'feet pictures' he'd have known that no officer and gent, let alone the fiancé of a lady (in the Wrens), could possibly go chasing after them.

"Mind you, they weren't the limit. Just rather charming nudes—but with that very definite difference, if you know what I mean."

As a matter of fact I didn't, and murmured as much.

"Stockings," said my friend succinctly. He paused and smiled. "Ridiculous, really, isn't it?"

"Quite," I agreed. "But rather fun. And there has to be a difference, of course. So I suppose Smith, remembering he was an officer and gent, tiptoed away, and . . ."

"Eh?"

"I mean, everyone lived happily ever afterward."

Frankly, I was disappointed. The story had seemed to be leading up to something better than a glimpse of a few rude postcards. I wondered what all the fuss had been about.

"What?" My companion seemed puzzled.

"I mean, that's the end," I explained patiently.

"The end? Good heavens, no. I say, I *am* telling this rottenly. Why, we haven't got to the really interesting bit yet."

"We haven't? Then you're not telling it rottenly at all; you're telling it damned well. Carry on."

"I say, do you mean that? You really want me to go on?"

I assured him I did want just that, and after ringing the bell again he resumed:

"Well, as a matter of fact, you were right. Smith did remember that after all he was an officer and a little gent, and as the houri still didn't show herself, he prepared to depart—and I won't pretend he didn't feel he was doing a pretty noble job. In fact, I don't believe he'd absolutely made up his mind when he noticed a door which looked as if it ought to lead into the adjoining room, and he thought he might just as well take a peep in there before clearing out. No need for nice scruples now, you see. So he did. And . . . and . . ."

"Yes?" I prompted him.

My companion studied the nails of his left hand with nonchalance, but I could see that his whole arm was tensed. I wondered what was coming.

"There was a naked girl lying on the floor—dead," he said in a flat voice. "Her throat had been cut. There was an awful lot of . . . blood."

"Good Lord!"

"Yes. It gave Smith . . . rather a shock."

"Well, naturally. What did he do?"

"That's just the point. What did he do? He beat it."

"Beat it?"

"Yes. Lost his head, I mean. Pretty rotten, don't you think?"

"Well," I said carefully, "I don't know about that. After all, you say he was young, and . . ."

"Yes, but not so young as all that. He ought to have rung up the police there and then. Of course he ought. But . . . don't you see the difficulty?"

I didn't, quite. "You mean, he didn't want, as an officer, to be mixed up in the murder of . . ."

"No, no! The point was, that little fat man had seen him go in the first time, but he hadn't seen him come out five minutes later. He hadn't seen him come back half an hour afterward. How was Smith going to prove that he hadn't been there all the time? He hadn't been back to his hotel, there probably

wasn't a soul who could swear to having seen him. *How was Smith going to prove he hadn't cut the girl's throat himself?*"

"Oh, I see!" I said. "Yes, of course."

"As you say, Smith saw the point at once. And I can tell you, it made him sweat. After all, innocent men *have* been convicted . . . Or haven't they? And in any case, what could Smith do? The girl was dead . . . perfectly dead! Her murderer was probably with her when Smith first called. But Smith hadn't seen him. He couldn't tell the police anything useful. The case would have been just the same whether Smith had barged into the maisonette or not.

"Besides, there was more to it than that. Smith's own father was a member of an important government mission, and the girl he was engaged to had a big job in the Waafs . . ."

"As a matter of fact, you said the Wrens," I murmured.

He looked at me. "Did I? Well, really it was the Ats. Anyhow, her father was . . . Well, I'll just say that to certain newspapers the news of his daughter's fiancé being mixed up in that kind of scandal would have seemed just too good to be true. Or so Smith thought. So after sweating blood for a minute or two, trying to decide, he just grabbed up the portfolio and . . . beat it."

"Ah, he collected the portfolio?"

My tone was ironical, but the blue eyes my host turned on me were innocent. "Of course," he said. "It had his fingerprints."

Again I thought he had come to the end, for he paused and sipped thoughtfully at his sherry. But before I could make the appropriate comments, he was off again.

"Well that was that. Smith beat it back to the Cosmopolitan and ordered a couple of the biggest drinks wartime Brighton could manage. He was pretty badly shaken. The portfolio was under his arm, underneath his greatcoat, and I can tell you it was burning a hole in his side. As soon as he'd finished his drinks he went up to his bedroom, cut the thing to ribbons with his razor, and burned the strips in his empty fireplace. Have you ever tried to burn a few dozen shiny postcards? It's not so easy as it sounds. It seemed to Smith to take hours. And when it was done he got in a panic about the ashes, and daren't go down to dinner till he'd collected them all up and put them in one of the lavatories and flushed them down.

"Smith didn't enjoy his dinner much that evening.

"Perhaps it was stupid of him to get the wind up so badly, but . . . I don't know. It seemed to him that a terrible lot hung on it. Not merely himself, you see, but all those other people. There'd be just hell to pay. He could see the headlines: *Fiancé of minister's daughter*

held on murder charge—father in government—fiancé in jail.

"I needn't tell you what sort of evening he spent. And the night! It was just hell. Smith's had a sympathy for criminals ever since. Waiting for that touch on the shoulder, you know . . . Well, it's true . . . even in one's sleep.

"He thought it all out—oh, half a million times! And by the morning he'd decided what to do. The obvious thing, he thought, was to get away from Brighton. The police would have his description—bound to! 'Tall young officer, wearing military greatcoat and peaked cap, fresh complexion, fair mustache,' all the rest of it. So the first thing he did was to shave off his mustache; then he dressed in civvies—luckily he'd brought a suit with him. Then he went down to breakfast . . . and I can tell you it took a bit of courage to do that. Then, as soon as he could manage it, he got out of that hotel. He had a notion that the police would make a round of the hotels. He had a taxi, and drove to the station. Probably the police would be watching the station, too, but he had to chance that.

"The funny thing was, he couldn't remember whether he'd shut the front door of the maisonette or not. It worried him like hell, too. If he had, you see, and the girl lived alone . . . Well, the murder might not be discovered for days. But if he hadn't, and the lights

burning inside . . . It worried poor old Smith to death.

"Anyhow, he got to London all right.

"There was nothing about the murder in the papers, and after a time Smith calmed down a bit. Perhaps he had left that door shut after all. He tried not to think of that poor girl lying there, all naked and cold, with the electric light burning overhead, just waiting for someone to come and find her . . . someone else, who wouldn't make such a mucker of it . . . someone else, in fact, who hadn't got other people to protect first.

"He put up at a hotel and spent the afternoon at his club. After tea he went to a theater (remember what queer times the theaters used to keep during the war?). It was a new play, and whom do you think he ran into in the first intermission? No—not a Brighton policeman: his girl. She'd got twenty-four hours' leave, rung up the Cosmopolitan just after he left, and his club ditto. The porter was able to tell her where he'd gone, so it wasn't a coincidence. (You writer blokes don't like coincidences, I know.)

"Well, of course, she took him off home for food after the show and wanted to know what had happened to his mustache. So it all came out. Well, not all. Smith managed to fake up some kind of a reason for calling on the girl without mentioning the sporting prints.

But he told her all about the fat man, and the fact that the shop had closed (of course, you spotted that more or less fixed the time of the murder), and the jam he was in over it all. As a matter of fact, he wanted to tell her. She was a . . . well, frankly, she was twice the man poor old Smith was. Clear-headed, you know, sensible and intelligent and all that, a really capable girl; one of the very best. God knows what she ever saw in poor old Smith."

"You knew her, then?" I could not help putting in maliciously.

"Eh? Oh! Well, yes; as a matter of fact, I did. Slightly, you know. Just slightly."

"Yes, and what did she say?"

"Oh, she took it very sensibly. Didn't ask any awkward questions. Quite saw it wasn't Smith's fault. Didn't blame him a bit for clearing out. Quite saw his point about her father, and herself. In fact, behaved exactly the grand girl she was."

"Good. So all ended happily?" I said, again conscious of disappointment. Dash it all, a fellow should not tell a murder story at all if it is going to end in a series of anticlimaxes. If a man gets mixed up in a murder, his life ought to be affected by it in some way. A murder, to be artistic, ought to behave like a bomb in the lives of law-abiding citizens, with its wounded as well as its slain.

"Happily? The devil it did!" exclaimed my host with energy.

"That's the whole point. You see, the girl took it for granted that Smith had only delayed going to the police until he had talked it over with her. When she told him that it didn't matter a cuss about her father, or herself, she expected him to march straight off to the nearest police station and spill the whole story."

"Oh!"

"Yes. That's rather how Smith felt. Because he just didn't see it that way. He pointed out over and over again the harm it might do her father, he even let drop a hint or two as to the dead girl's profession and the sort of unsavory scandal it would mean. But it was no good. They argued the whole evening but his girl wouldn't budge an inch. It was his duty to go to the police, irrespective of the consequences to anyone, so go he must: and that was all there was to it.

"Well, I'm afraid you can see what's coming. Smith couldn't keep it up forever. It was clear the girl meant what she said about her family, and gradually she pulled that line out of Smith's grasp. He had been clinging to it, you see. But when they came to the real showdown, they both had to face the truth. It hadn't been the girl's family Smith was really thinking of: it had been himself. And that was the moral problem Smith was driven in the end to face: either to go to the police, confess to what he'd done and what he'd left un-

done, and take the rap if it was coming to him, or . . ." My host broke off, swallowed a sip or two of sherry, and then added quietly: "Or admit to being a coward." He looked me suddenly in the face. "Which would you have done?"

"God knows! Which did Smith do?"

He twiddled the stem of his wine glass. "Smith *wanted* to do the right thing. I think we can say that for him. But when it came to the point . . . After all, there were so many factors. He was keen on his job in the Army; doing well, too. And there was the girl's father: Smith couldn't brush him aside the way his daughter had. And his own father too. And after all, how could it help if he did go to the police? He couldn't tell them anything they wouldn't know already. No! It's no good making excuses. Smith just hadn't the guts. Not even when the girl made a personal matter of it.

"Finally she cut short his blathering and told him plainly that she couldn't marry a . . . a coward. Either he went to the police then and there, or their engagement was at an end. Smith felt like death, but . . . he couldn't go to the police and chance being arrested for a murder he hadn't done. So the girl pulled off her ring, Smith took it . . ." He sighed. "Smith never saw her again."

There was silence. At last I said, "And that really was the end?"

"Not quite." An ironic little smile played round his mouth. "There's just one more touch—quite a nice one. To get back to his hotel, Smith had to go to an Underground station. The bookstall had closed, of course, but by it there was one of those blackboards they used for bulletins in the war. Smith saw chalked up on it: *Late Special—Girl Murdered at Brighton, Man Confesses.*"

"Perfect!" I exclaimed with enthusiasm. "Of course I can use it. Why, it's a short story as it stands, twist in the tale and all."

"I thought you might be interested," said my host mildly. "Er . . . you will wrap it up a bit, though, won't you? I mean . . ."

"Oh, yes. It's only the essence I want. But what a climax! . . . I suppose Smith did love the girl, by the way? Yes, of course he did, or it would be a rotten story. . . . And then that nasty jab under the ribs from the blackboard, showing that all his agony had been in vain and if the poor boob had only held his tongue like any sensible man . . ."

My host looked bewildered and not a little hurt. "I don't quite understand?"

"Why," I said unmercifully, "it's a good short story, sliced off just there. But Smith wasn't a short story. He was a man. And was Smith's life really shattered?"

"Well, no, if you put it like that. I suppose it wasn't."

"I do put it like that. You see, things work out a bit differently in real life. It doesn't stop, for instance, the way a short story does. Now, is this Smith of yours married?"

"Er . . . yes, he is."

"Any children?"

"Well, a couple . . ."

"Does he love his wife?"

"Of course he does."

"Good! Then shall I tell you what I think? I think Smith had the devil's own luck."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Why, can't you see? But for that little episode Smith might be married now to a cold, unemotional, steel bar of a woman, without a spark of humanity, or the decent femininity to love a man all the *more* for lacking a bit of moral guts once in a while—if indeed anybody but one of those death-or-duty fiends could call it moral guts to go and get oneself arrested for a murder in which one had no concern at all. Take it from me, Smith was well out of that engagement. Don't you agree?" I pressed him relentlessly.

"Well, I . . . Smith . . . I don't think Smith's ever looked at it that way," he stammered.

"Oh, I've no doubt Smith will have thoroughly dramatized the episode," I rubbed it in. After all, I owed him a good turn for the story, though he might not know I was doing him one. "But you tell him from me that it's about time he saw it in its proper perspective. The

whole problem was artificial, and to make it a test of true love was the act of an iceberg, not of a grand girl. I'm quite sure that instead of helping Smith to increase his normal stock of courage, which a decent girl does by encouraging his *amour propre* that smug little wretch did him a great deal of harm. It takes two to make a hero, you know. Instead, it's obvious she gave him a bad inferiority complex, by the angle he stresses of his own story. Now look here, you take Smith aside and tell him from me that he's got just as much guts as the next man. It's all nonsense to look on himself as a spineless—"

A large hand suddenly descended on my shoulder and a large

voice boomed in my ear. "Hullo, old boy! Sorry I'm a bit late and all that. Someone been feeding you a spot of sherry? Good!"

"Yes, I don't know if . . ." I looked round for my late host but his place was vacant. Behind me I heard a door quietly closing. I tried to keep the intense curiosity out of my voice. "Yes, some complete stranger's been very kind. Did you happen to see him, George? Who is he?"

"Oh, I know who he is," George said largely. "New member. Name of Farquharson. As a matter of fact, he's rather our star here."

"Star?"

"Yes. Our one and only holder of the Victoria Cross."



Ellery Queen

The Needle's Eye

THIS BEING A TALE OF PIRATES AND stolen treasure, it is a gratification to record that it all happened in that season of the year to which the moonstone and the poppy are traditionally dedicated. For the moonstone is a surprisingly moral object. To its lawful owner it brings nothing but good: held in the mouth at the full of the moon, it reveals the future; it heats the lover and it cools the heated; it cures epilepsy and fructifies trees. But rot, rue, pox and blight upon him who lays thievish hands on it, for then it invokes the black side of its nature and brings down upon the thief nothing but evil. Such exact justice is unarguably desirable in a story of piracy which, while boasting no moonstones—although there were buckets of other gems—did reach its apogee in Augustus Caesar's month, which is the moonstone's month. And the poppy springs from the blood of the slain, its scarlet blooms growing thickest on battlefields and in places of carnage. So it is a poetic duty to report that there is murder in this August tale, too.

The sea-robber involved was master of the galley *Adventure*, a Scotsman who was thoroughly hanged in London's Execution Dock two centuries and a half ago

—alas, on a day in May—and whose name ever since has stood for piracy in general. Ellery had tangled with historical characters before, but never with one so kindling as this; and it must be confessed that he embarked on the case of Captain Kidd's treasure with a relish more suitable to a small boy in his first hot pursuit of Mr. Legrand's golden *scarabaeus* than to a weary workman in words and the case-hardened son of a modern New York policeman.

And then there was Eric Ericsson.

Ericsson was that most tragic of men, an explorer in an age when nothing of original note remained on earth to be explored. He had had to content himself with being, not the first in anything, but the farthest, or the highest, or the deepest. Where five channels in the Northwest Passage were known, Ericsson opened a sixth. He found a peak in Sikang Province of western China, in the Amne Machin Range, which was almost a thousand feet higher than Everest, but he lost his instruments and his companions and Mount Everest remained on the books the highest mountain on the planet. Ericsson went farther and wider in the great Juf depression of the Sahara than

the Citroën expedition, but this did not salve the nettling fact that other men had blazed the trail. And so it had gone all his life. Now in middle age, broken in health, Ericsson rested on his bitter fame—honorary fellowships and medals from all the proper learned societies, membership and officership in clubs like the Explorers', Cosmos, Athenaeum—and brooded over his memories in his New York apartment or, occasionally, at the fire-side of the old stone house on the island he owned off Montauk Point, Long Island.

Ellery had heard the story of William Kidd and Ericsson's Island as a result of his first meeting with Ericsson at the Explorers' Club. Not from Ericsson—their introduction had been by the way and their conversation brief; if any discoveries had been made it was by Ericsson, who explored Ellery with far swifter economy than that explorer in other spheres would have believed possible of anyone but himself. Then the large, burned, bowed man had shuffled off, leaving Ellery to quiz his host of the evening, a cartographer of eminence. When this amiable personage mentioned Ericsson's Island and the buccaneer of the *Adventure* in adjoining breaths, Ellery's bow plunged into the wind.

"You mean you've never heard that yarn?" asked the cartographer with the incredulity of the knowledgeable man. "I thought everyone

had!" And he gripped his glass and set sail.

An Ericsson had taken possession of the little island in the fourth quarter of the Seventeenth Century, and he had managed to hold on to it through all the proprietary conflicts of that brawling era. Along the way the Northman acquired a royal patent which somehow weathered the long voyage of colonial and American history.

"Now did Kidd know Ericsson's Island?" asked the cartographer, settling himself as if for argument. "The circumstantial evidence is good. We know that in 1691, for instance, he was awarded £150 by the council of New York for his services during the disturbances in the colony 'after the rebellion of 1688.' And then, of course, there was the treasure found on Gardiner's Island off the tip of Long Island after Kidd's arrest in 1699 on a charge of murder and piracy. On a clear day you can see Ericsson's Island from Gardiner's Island with a glass. How could he have missed it?"

"It's your story," said Ellery judicially. "Go on."

William Kidd served respectably against the French in the West Indies, the cartographer continued, and in 1695 he was in London. Recommended as fit to command a vessel for the king, Captain Kidd received the royal commission to arrest all freebooters and *boucaniers*, and he sailed the galley *Ad-*

venture from Plymouth in 1696 into a life, not of arresting pirates, but of outpirating them.

"The rest is history," said the cartographer, "although some of it is dubious history. We do know that in 1698 or thereabout he was in these parts in a small sloop. Well, the story has persisted for over two hundred and fifty years that during this period—when Kidd deserted the *Adventure* in Madagascar and took to the sloop, eventually working his way to these waters—he paid a visit to Ericsson's Island."

"To Gardiner's Island," corrected Ellery.

"And Ericsson's," said his host stubbornly. "Why not? About £14,000 was recovered from Kidd's vessel and from Gardiner's Island afterward; there must have been a great deal more than that. Why, John Avery—'Long Ben'—once grabbed off 100,000 pieces of eight in a single haul, and a Mogul's daughter to boot!

"What happened to the rest of Kidd's booty? Is it likely he'd have cached it all in one place? He knew he was in for serious trouble—he tried to bribe Governor Bellomont, you'll recall. And with Ericsson's Island so handy. . . ."

"What's the story?" murmured Ellery.

"Oh, that he put into the cove there with a small boat one night, by a ruse got into the Ericsson house—the original's still standing, by the way, beautifully preserved

—gave Ericsson and his family fifteen minutes to get off the island, and used the place as his headquarters for a few days. When Kidd cleared out, to be seized and shipped to England shortly after, the Ericssons went back to their island—"

"And perforated it fore and aft and amidships for the treasure Kidd presumably buried there," said Ellery, trying to sound amused.

"Well, certainly," said the cartographer peevishly. "Wouldn't you have?"

"But they never found it."

"Neither they nor their heirs or assigns. But that doesn't mean it isn't there, Queen."

"Doesn't mean it is, either."

Nevertheless, Ellery went home that night feeling as if he had spent the evening in a hurricane off the Spanish Main, clinging to the wild rigging.

It was not quite two weeks later, in a mid-August spell of Dry Tortugan weather, that Eric Ericsson telephoned. The explorer sounded remote, as if deep—at least six fathoms deep—affairs were on his mind.

"Could you see me confidentially, Mr. Queen? I know you're a busy man, but if it's possible—"

"Are you calling from town, Mr. Ericsson?"

"Yes."

"You come right on over!"

Nikki could not understand El-

lery's excitement. "Buried treasure," she sniffed. "A grown man."

"Women," pontificated Mr. Queen, "have no imagination."

"I suppose that's true," said his secretary coolly, "if you mean the kind that heats up at a bucket of nasty gore and a couple of rum-soaked yo-ho-hos. Who ever heard of a lady pirate?"

"Two of the bloodiest pirates in the business were Anne Bonny and Mary Read."

"Then they were no ladies!"

Twenty minutes later the doorbell rang and Nikki, still sniffishly, admitted the owner of the island whose clamshells had once been crunched by the tread of Captain Kidd and his cutthroat crew.

"Glad you didn't waste any time getting here, Mr. Ericsson," said Ellery enthusiastically. "The sooner we get going on it—"

"You know why I'm here?" The explorer frowned.

"It doesn't take a math shark to put a couple of twos together."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Oh, come, Mr. Ericsson," chortled Ellery. "If it's Nikki you're worried about, I assure you that not only is she the custodian of all my secrets, she also has no interest whatsoever in buried treasure."

"Buried treasure?" Ericsson waved a charred hand impatiently. "That's not what I wanted to see you about."

"It's . . . not?"

"I've never put any stock in that yarn, Mr. Queen. In fact, the whole picture of Kidd as a pirate in my opinion is a myth and an historical libel. Kidd was the goat of a political intrigue, I'm convinced, not a pirate at all. Dalton's book presented some pretty conclusive evidence. If it's real pirates you're after, look up Bartholomew Roberts. Roberts took over four hundred ships during his career."

"Then the story of Kidd's seizure of Ericsson's Island—?"

"He may have visited the island around 1698, but if it was to bury anything I've never seen the slightest evidence of it. Mr. Queen, I'd like to tell you why I came."

"Yes," sighed Ellery, and Nikki felt almost sorry for him.

Ericsson's problem involved romance, but not the kind that glittered under pirate moons. His only sister, a widow, had died shortly after Ericsson's retirement, leaving a daughter. The explorer's relationship with his sister had been distant, and he had last seen her child, Inga, as a leggy creature of twelve with a purple pimple on her nose. But at the sister's funeral he found himself embraced as "Uncle Eric" by a golden Norse goddess of nineteen. His niece was alone in the world and she had clung to him. Ericsson, a bachelor, found the girl filling a need he had never dreamed existed. Inga left college and came to live with him as his ward, the consolation of his

empty retirement, and the sole heir of his modest fortune.

At first they were inseparable—in Ericsson's New York household, at the stone house on the island during long weekends. But Inga began to glow, and the moths came. They were young moths and they rather interfered. So Ericsson—selfishly, he admitted—had his yacht refurbished and sailed away on a cruise of the Caribbean.

"Biggest mistake of my life," the explorer shrugged. "We stopped over in the Bahamas, and there Inga met a young Britisher, Anthony Hobbes-Watkins, who was living a gentlemanly beachcomber sort of existence out on Lyford Cay, at the other end of New Providence Island. It was Inga's first serious love affair. I should have taken her away immediately. When I woke up, it was too late."

"Elopement?" asked Nikki hopefully.

"No, no, Miss Porter, it was a cathedral wedding. I couldn't stand in Inga's way. And I really had nothing definite to go on."

Ellery said: "There's something fishy about Hobbes-Watkins?"

"I don't know, Mr. Queen." Ericsson's heavy, burned-out face remained expressionless, but not his eyes. "That's what I want you to find out."

"What do you know about him?"

"Only what he's told me and a few things I've picked up. Cap-

taincy in the RAF during the war, and not much of anything since—I don't hold that against him, it's a rocky world. All the British upper-class attainments—shoots well, plays an earnest game of polo, grouses about the fading star of empire; that sort of thing. Knew all the right people in Nassau; but he hadn't been there long.

"His father, a Colonel Hobbes-Watkins, came on from somewhere—England, he said—for the wedding," continued the explorer, and he shrugged again. "A stout, red, loud, horsy specimen, nearly a caricature, of his type. They seem to have plenty of money, so it can't be that. But there *is* . . . something, a mystery, a vagueness about them that keeps disturbing me. They're like figures on a movie screen—you see them move, you hear them talk, but they never seem flesh and blood. Two-dimensional . . . I'm not saying this well," said Ericsson, flushing. "When a man's tramped mountains and deserts and jungles all his life, as I have, he develops an extra sense." He looked up. "I don't trust them."

"I suppose," said Nikki, "your niece does."

"Well, Inga's young and unsophisticated, and she's very much in love. That's what makes it so awkward. But she's become important to me, and for her sake I can't let this go on unless I'm satisfied she hasn't made some awful mistake."

"Have you noticed anything different since the wedding, Mr. Ericsson?" asked Ellery. "A change in their attitude?"

The explorer scraped the back of his neck with a limp handkerchief. But he said defiantly, "They whisper together."

Ellery raised his brows.

But Ericsson went on doggedly. "Right after the wedding Colonel Hobbes-Watkins left for the States. On business, he said. I gave the yacht to Inga and Tony for a three-week honeymoon. On their way back they picked me up in Nassau and we sailed up to New York, meeting Tony's father here . . . On three different occasions I've come on the Hobbes-Watkinses having whispered conversations which break off like a shot. I don't like it, Mr. Queen. I don't like it to such an extent," said Ericsson quietly, "that I've deliberately kept us all in the city instead of doing the sensible thing in this heat and living down at the island. My island is pretty isolated, and it would make the ideal setting for a . . . Instead of which, Tony and Inga have my apartment, I'm stopping at one of my clubs, and the Colonel is sweating it out politely in a midtown hotel—business, unspecified, still keeping him in the States. But I can't stall any longer. Inga's been after me now for weeks to shove off for the Point, and she's beginning to look at me queerly. I've had to promise we'd all go down

this weekend for the rest of the summer."

"It would make the ideal setting," said Ellery, "for a what?"

"You'll think I'm cracked."

"For a what, Mr. Ericsson?"

"All right!" The explorer gripped the arms of his chair. "For a murder," he muttered.

Nikki stared. "Oh, I'm sure—" she began.

But Ellery's foot shifted and somehow crushed Nikki's little toe. "Murder of whom, Mr. Ericsson?"

"Inga! Me! Both of us—I don't know!" He controlled himself with an effort. "Maybe I'm hallucinated. But I tell you those two are scoundrels and my island would be a perfect place for whatever they're up to. What I'd like you to do, Mr. Queen, is come down this weekend for an indefinite stay. Will you?"

Ellery glanced at his secretary; Nikki was often his umpire when he was playing the game of working. But she was regarding him with the grim smile of a spectator.

"Come down, too, Miss Porter," said the explorer, misinterpreting the glance. "Inga will love having you. Besides, your coming will make it appear purely social. I don't want Inga having the least suspicion that . . . Don't bother about a wardrobe; we lead the most primitive life on the island. And there's plenty of room; the house has tripled its original size. About the fee, Mr. Queen—"

"We'll discuss fees," murmured Ellery, "when there's something to charge a fee for. We'll be there, Mr. Ericsson. I can't leave, however, before Saturday morning. When are you planning to go down?"

"Friday." The explorer looked worried.

"I don't imagine they'd try anything the very first night," said Ellery soothingly. "And you're not exactly a helpless old gaffer."

"Good lord! You don't think it's myself I'm concerned about! It's Inga . . . married and . . ." Ericsson stopped abruptly. Then he smiled and rose. "Of course you're right. I'll have the launch waiting for you at Montauk Point. You don't know how this relieves me."

"But won't your niece suspect something by the mere fact of Ellery's being invited down?" asked Nikki. "Unless, Ellery, you cook up one of your stories."

"How's this?" beamed Ellery. "I met Mr. Ericsson at the Explorers' Club recently, heard the family tale about Captain Kidd's treasure, I couldn't resist it, and I'm coming down to try to solve a two-hundred-and-fifty-odd-year-old mystery. Simple?"

"Simply perfect," exclaimed Ericsson. "Inga's had them half-believing the yarn ever since the Bahamas, and if I talk it up for the rest of the week you'll have them under your feet—they'll follow you around like tourists. See you both Saturday."

"It's simple, all right," said Nikki when the explorer had gone. "The simple truth! Shall I pack your extra cutlass, my bucko—and a couple of all-day suckers?"

Eric Ericsson and his niece met them at Montauk Point Saturday morning and hurtled them over blue water in a noisy launch. It was hard to think of wickedness. Inga was a big solid blonde girl with the uncomplicated loveliness of the North, friendly and charming and—Nikki thought—happy as a newlywed could be. The day was stainless, the sun brilliant, the horizon picketed with racing sails; a salt breeze blew the girls' hair about, and the world looked a jolly place. Even Ericsson was composed, as if he had slept unexpectedly well or the presence of serene, golden-legged Inga gave him the strength to dissemble his fears.

"I think it's so thrilling," Inga cried over the roar of the launch. "And Tony and the Colonel have talked of nothing else since Uncle Eric told us why you were coming down, Mr. Queen. Do you really feel there's hope?"

"I try to," Ellery shouted. "By the way, I'm disappointed. I thought your husband and father-in-law might be with you in the launch."

"Oh, that's Uncle Eric's fault," the girl said, and the explorer smiled. "He kidnaped me before I could scream for help."

"Guilty." Ericsson's grip on the wheel gave the lie to his smile. "I don't see much of you now that you're Mrs. Hobbes-Watkins."

"Darling, I'm glad you kidnapped me. I really am."

"Even though Mr. Hobbes-Watkins is probably fit to be tied?"

Inga looked happy.

But Nikki, the sun notwithstanding, felt a chill. Ericsson had been afraid to leave Inga alone on the island with her husband and father-in-law.

Ellery kept chattering to Inga about the paragon she had married, while Ericsson stood quietly over the wheel. Nikki could have told the great man that he was wasting his celebrated breath: the girl was in the first heaven of wedded bliss, where the beloved hangs in space clothed in perfect light and there is no past.

From the horizon rose a seaweed-hung otter with a fish in its mouth, which changed rapidly into a long low-lying island thinly wooded and running down to a white beach and a pretty cove. As the launch drew near, they made out a shed, a boathouse, and a jetty. A lank, disjointed something stuck up from the jetty like a piece of driftwood. It turned surprisingly into a one-legged old man. His left leg was gone at the knee; the trouser of his bleached, fishy jeans was pinned back over the stump; and to the stump there was strapped a crude, massive pegleg. With a skin re-

sembling the shed's corrugated roof, a nose that was a twist of bone, crafty and secretive eyes, and a greasy bandanna tied behind his ears against the sun, the peglegged old man looked remarkably like a pirate; and Nikki said so.

"That's why we call him Long John," Inga said as her uncle maneuvered the launch toward the jetty. "At least Tony and I do. Uncle Eric calls him Fleugelheimer, or something as ridiculous, though I suppose it's his name. He's not very bright, and he has no manners at all. Hi, Long John!" she called. "Catch the line."

The old man hopped sidewise with great agility and caught the line, poorly tossed, in his powerful right hand. Immediately he wheeled on Ericsson, his bony jaws grinding.

"Bloodsucker!" he yelled.

"Now, John," said the explorer.

"When ye givin' me more money?"

"John, we have guests . . ."

"Or d'ye want me to quit? Ye want me to quit!"

"Make the line fast," said Ericsson with a faint smile.

"I'm a poor man," whined the old pirate, obeying. Suddenly he squinted sidewise at Ellery. "This the great detecative?"

"Yes, John."

"Henh!" said Long John, and he spat into the water, grinning evilly. He seemed to have forgotten all about his grievance.

"He's been on the island for years," Ericsson explained as they went up a rough path in the woods. "My caretaker. Surly old devil—not all there. He's a miser—hoards every penny I give him, and keeps dunning me for more with the regularity of a parrot. I ignore him and we get along fine."

And there was the stone house at the hump of the island's back. Clean wings stretched from a central building whose stones were grimy with weathered age. The old part of the house rose in a clapboard tower. The tower was square, with several small windows from which, Ellery thought, the whole island and a great spread of the sea must be visible. Undoubtedly the lookout tower of the original structure.

To one side of the house someone—Ericsson, or one if his more recent forebears—had built a rough but comfortable terrace. It was paved with oyster shells and there was a huge barbecue pit.

Two men—one portly and middle-aged, the other slim and young—rose from deck chairs waving frosty glasses.

And the instant Ellery laid eyes on the Hobbes-Watkinses he knew Eric Ericsson had been right.

It was hard to say why. They were almost professionally British, especially Colonel Hobbes-Watkins, but that did not account for it; and

for the rest of the day Ellery devoted himself to this riddle. He did not solve it.

On the surface the men were plausible. Inga's husband was handsome in a thin, underdone way; he slouched and lolled as if he were hopelessly tired; speech seemed forced out of him; and he drank a good deal. This was the very picture of the young post-war European, spoiled, sick, and disenchanting. Still . . . The elder Hobbes-Watkins was Colonel Blimp to the life, fussing and bluster and full of old-fashioned prejudices. A warmed-over mutton roast, as Nikki promptly dubbed him in a mumble. But there was something in the Colonel's bloated eye and occasionally in his blasting tone that had a lean and cynical energy in it, not at all in character.

During the afternoon Ellery, playing his role of historical detective, set off on a survey of the island. Inga, Tony, and the Colonel insisted on accompanying him.

Long John was fishing from a dory off the cove. When he spied them, he deliberately turned his back.

Ellery began to saunter along the beach, the others trotting eagerly behind.

"Needn't be bashful," he called, mindful of Inga between the two ogres at his back. "I'm merely casing the joint. Come up here, Inga."

"Casing the joint," wheezed Colonel Hobbes-Watkins. "Very good,

haha! But I say, won't two trample the clues?"

"Not much danger of that, Colonel," said Ellery cheerfully, "after two and a half centuries. Inga, do join me."

"Glad I ambled along," said Tony Hobbes-Watkins in a languid voice. It sounded queerly dutiful for a groom. Ellery was conscious of the man's eyes; they kept a staring watch.

They went around the island in an hour. It was long and narrow and swelled to a ridge in the middle. The vegetation was scrubby and poor. There was no close anchorage except off the cove. None of the trees, which might have been landmarks, looked old; the island was exposed to the sea, and centuries of winter gales had kept it pruned.

"I don't suppose," Ellery asked Inga as they climbed the path back to the house in the dusk, "the story has ever had any documentation? Chart, map—anything like that?"

"Nothing that still exists. But it's said that there was once a letter or diary page or something left by the 1698 Ericsson—it's been lost, if it ever existed at all—telling about the clue in Captain Kidd's room, and of course that's been the big mystery ever since."

"Clue? Kidd's room?" exclaimed Ellery "No one's mentioned that!"

"Didn't Eric tell you?" murmured the younger Englishman.

"Fantastic fellow, Eric. No imagination."

"I wondered why you hadn't steamed up there immediately," panted the Colonel. "Fancy your uncle's not telling Mr. Queen the most exciting part of it, Inga! It's the chamber the pirate watched the sea from when he took the island over—didn't you say, my dear?"

"The tower room," said Inga, pointing through the dusk. "That was in the lost letter, and the reference to the clue Kidd left there."

"Clue left in the tower room?" Ellery squinted through the twilight hungrily. "And that's the original room up there, Inga?"

"Yes."

"What was the clue?"

But the terrace and Long John at the barbecue pit intervened; and since the one-legged caretaker was brandishing a veritable trident as he glowered at the latecomers, Ellery was not answered.

They had dinner.

A great moon rose, and the air turned chilly. Ellery wandered to the edge of the terrace with his plate, and a moment later Eric Ericsson joined him.

"Well?" the explorer asked.

"Nothing tangible, Mr. Ericsson. But I agree—there's something in the wind."

"What about tonight? I've put you next to the Colonel's room, and I have an automatic, but Inga . . . alone with . . ."

"I've already fixed that. Nikki is

all things to all men, and tonight she's going to be so nervous in this primeval setting that she'll just have to sleep with somebody. Since she's had a strict upbringing, that means with Inga, the only other female here. A dirty trick to play on a new husband," said Ellery dryly, "but Tony can console himself with the prospect of a good night's sleep in the room next to mine." Ericsson pressed Ellery's arm rather pathetically. "For the rest of the evening, Mr. Ericsson," murmured Ellery, "please follow my lead. I'm going to be treasure-hunting like mad."

"Ha. Caught you whispering," said a voice at Ellery's elbow; it was young Hobbes-Watkins with a glass in his hand. "Pumping Eric about that clue, eh, Queen?"

"We were just getting round to it," said Ellery. "Girls couldn't take it, I see." Inga and Nikki were gone.

"Driven to cover by the mosquitoes and gnats," boomed the Colonel, slapping himself. "Lovely children, but females, what? Ah, there, you dog, don't shake your head at your old bachelor father! The moon's bloody, and it's the hour for high adventure, didn't some chap say? About that clue, Mr. Queen . . ."

"Yes, you never said a word to me about Captain Kidd's room, Mr. Ericsson," said Ellery reproachfully. "What's all this about a clue he's supposed to have left up there?"

"It's characteristically cryptic," said the explorer, pouring coffee. "The legend says that just before Kidd was to be hanged in London he sent a letter to my ancestor admitting that he'd buried a treasure on Ericsson's Island in '98, and saying that 'to find it you must look through the eye of the needle.'"

"Eye of the needle," said Ellery. "Eye of which needle?"

"Ah!" said Colonel Hobbes-Watkins ominously. "There's the rub, as the Bard says. No one knows—eh, Ericsson?"

"I'm afraid not, Colonel. And no one ever will, because it's all moonshine."

"Don't see why you say that, Eric, at all," said Tony, almost energetically. "Could have been a needle!"

"Even if there had been," Ericsson smiled in his moonshine, "two hundred and fifty years make a large haystack."

"One moment!" said Ellery. "Look through the eye of the needle *in the tower room*, Mr. Ericsson?"

"That's how it goes."

"What's in the room?"

"Nothing at all. Just four walls, a floor, and a ceiling. I assure you, Mr. Queen, everything's been tried—unsuccessfully—from hunting for a peculiar rock formation to conjuring up a tree fork viewed from a certain angle from the windows."

Ellery stared up at the tower. Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"How do I get up there?"

"There's the sleuth for you!" cried Colonel Hobbes-Watkins, hurling himself from his chair. "Been itching to have a go at that ruddy room myself!"

"But Eric's been so discouraging," murmured his son.

Nikki and Inga had their heads together before the fireplace, where Long John was laying a fire. Inga fell behind to say something to her young husband, who glanced quickly at Nikki and then shrugged.

The explorer led the way up a tiny narrow coiling staircase, holding a kerosene lamp high. "The tower's never been electrified," he called down, his deep voice reverberating. "Better use those flashlights or you'll break your necks on these stairs."

"Eeee," said Nikki convincingly; but it was only a dried-up wasps' nest. The stairs sagged at every step.

The climb ended in a little landing and a massive door of blackened oak and hand-forged iron. Ericsson set his big shoulder to the door. It gave angrily. The lamp bobbed off.

"A couple of you had better stay on the landing. This floor may not hold up under so much weight. Come in, Mr. Queen."

It was scarcely more than a large closet with miniature square windows. A floor of dirt-glazed random boards, undulant like the sea;

a rafted ceiling only a few inches above the men's heads; and four papered walls. And that was all, except for dust and cobwebs. The windows, of imperfectly blown glass, were closed.

"Open them, Ellery," choked Nikki from the doorway. "You can't breathe up here."

"You can't open them," said Inga. "They've been stuck fast for generations."

Ellery stood in the middle of the room looking about.

"Aren't you going to get down on all fours, Mr. Queen?" bellowed the Colonel from the landing. "Like the fellow from Baker Street?"

"I find these walls much more interesting."

But the only thing Nikki could see on the walls was the wallpaper. The paper showed an imitation colored marble design on a grainy background—ugly as sin, Nikki thought, and even uglier for being faded and mildewed in great patches.

Ellery was at one of the walls now, actually caressing it, holding the lamp close to the marbled paper. Finally, he began at a corner and went over the paper inch by inch, from ceiling to floor. At one point he examined something for a long time. Then he resumed his deliberate inspection, and he neither spoke nor looked around until he had completed his tour of the room.

"This wallpaper," he said. "Do

you know, Mr. Ericsson, what you have here?"

"Dash it all, sir," interrupted the Colonel explosively, "are you treasure-hunting, or what?"

"The wallpaper?" Ericsson frowned. "All I know about it is that it's very old."

"To be exact, late Seventeenth Century," said Ellery. "This is genuine flock paper, made by the famous Dunbar of Aldermanbury. It's probably quite valuable."

"There's a treasure for you," wailed Inga.

"If so," shrugged her uncle, "it's the first I've run across on the island."

"There may be a second," said Ellery. "If we look through the eye of the needle."

"Don't tell me, Queen," said Inga's husband with what might have been animation, "you've spotted something."

"Yes."

The Hobbes-Watkinses made admiring sounds and Inga embraced her spouse. The explorer seemed stunned.

"Do you mean to say," demanded Nikki in a loud voice, "that you walk into a strange room and in ten minutes solve a mystery that's baffled everybody for two hundred and fifty years? Come, Mr. Q!"

"It's still only theory," said Ellery apologetically. "Inga, may I borrow a broom?"

"A broom!"

Inga, Tony, and the Colonel

shouted chaotically down the tower stairs for Long John to fetch the best broom on the premises. Then they ran into the little room and danced around Ellery.

"If the yarn is true at all," Ellery said, "Kidd couldn't have meant it literally when he instructed your ancestor, Mr. Ericsson, to 'look through the eye of the needle.' The early treasure-hunters saw that at once, or they wouldn't have looked for peculiar rock and tree formations. They just didn't look close enough to home. It was under their noses all the time."

"What was under their noses all the time?" asked Nikki.

"The marble design on this wallpaper. Marble's unique characteristic is its veining. Look at these veins in the pattern. Some are long and thin, tapering to a point—"

"Like needles," said the explorer slowly.

Everyone began scuttling along a wall.

"But where's one with an opening?" shrieked Inga. "Oh, I can't find a—a bloody eye!"

"An eye, an eye," mumbled the Colonel feverishly. "There must be one with an eye!"

"There is," said Ellery. "Just one, and here it is over near this window."

And while they stared in awe at the place on the wall beyond the tip of Ellery's forefinger, Long John's boot and pegleg stumped in to the tower room.

"Broom." He flung it.

Ellery seized it, placed the end of the broom handle on the open space in the needle-shaped vein, said with piety, "Let us pray," and pushed.

There was a ripping sound and the broom handle burst through the wallpaper and sank into the wall. Ellery kept pushing gently. The handle slid out of sight up to the sweep.

Ellery withdrew the broom and stepped back.

"Mr. Ericsson," he said, not without emotion, "the honor of the first look is yours."

"Well, don't just crouch there, Uncle Eric!" moaned Inga. "What do you see?"

"Can you see *anything*?"

"But he must—there's a bright moon!"

"Now, my dears, give the old chap a chance—"

"I see," said Eric Ericsson slowly, "a bit of the northeast shoreline. You know the place, Inga. It's the postage-stamp patch of beach with the slight overhang of flat rock. Where you've sunbathed."

"Let me see!"

"Let me!"

"It is!"

"It can't be. By George, not really—"

"What luck!"

There was a great deal of confusion.

Ellery said rapidly, "Mr. Ericsson, since you know just where the

place is, take a hurricane lamp and a stake and get down there. We'll keep watch through the peephole. When we've got your lamp in the center of our sight, we'll signal with a flashlight three times from this window. Drive your stake into the sand at that point, and we'll join you there with shovels."

"I'll get 'em!" shrieked a voice; and they turned to see Long John's peg vanishing.

Fifteen minutes later, with Inga sprinting ahead, they thrashed through the scrub toward the explorer's light.

They found Ericsson standing on an outcrop of silvery rock, smiling. "No hurry," he said. "And no treasure—not till low tide tomorrow morning, anyway."

Ericsson's stake was protruding from four and a half feet of ocean.

Nikki found herself able to play the part of a nervous city female with no difficulty at all. How could Inga *sleep*? she thought as she thrashed about in the twin bed. When in a few hours she was going to be the heiress of a pirate's treasure? . . . The . . . *piracy* of that pirate . . . to bury it so that for half the elapsed time the Atlantic rolled over it. . . . He ought to be hanged. . . .

Then Nikki remembered that he *had* been hanged; and that was her last thought until a hand clamped over her mouth and a light flashed

briefly into her eyes and Ellery's voice said affectionately in her ear. "You certainly sleep soundly. Get into some clothes and join me outside. And don't wake anyone or I'll be tempted to give you a taste of the cat."

Nikki slipped out of the house into a dead and lightless world. She could not even make out the terrace. But Ellery rose out of the void and led her down the path and into the woods, his grip forbidding noise. Not until they had gone several hundred yards did he turn on his flashlight, and even then he cupped its beam.

"Is it all right to talk now?" Nikki asked coldly. "What time is it? Where are we going? And why are you practically naked? And do you think this is cricket? After all, Ellery, it's not your treasure."

"It's not quite four, we're getting the jump on our friends, I expect it will be wet and mucky work, and pirate loot calls for pirate methods. Would you rather go back to your hot little bed?"

"No," said Nikki. "Though it all sounds pretty juvenile to me. How can you dig through sea water?"

"Low tide at 4:29 A.M.—I checked with a tide table at the house."

Nikki began to feel excited all over again.

And she almost burst into a yo-ho-ho when they came out on the flat rock and saw Ericsson's stake below them lapped by a mere inch or two of water. . . .

The sun made its appearance with felicity. The first sliver of fried-egg radiance slipped over the edge of the sea's blue plate just as Ellery's spade rang a sort of breakfast bell. Nikki, who was flat on the wet sand with her head in the hole, and Ellery, whose salted hair bobbed a foot below Nikki's chin, responded to the sound with hungry cries.

"It's a metal box, Nikki!"

"Wheel!"

"Don't come down here! Get that windlass ready."

"Where? What's a windlass?"

"That drum up there for hoisting!" Before turning in the previous night the men had lugged all the portable paraphernalia they could find in the shed down to the site of the treasure. "And unwind the line and pay it down to me—"

"Yaaaaa-hoo!" Nikki ran around in her little bare feet madly.

Twenty minutes later they knelt panting on the sand at the edge of the hole, staring at a brassbound iron chest with a fat convex lid. It was a black and green mass of corruption. Shreds of crumbled stuff told where leather had once been strapped. And the chest was so deliciously heavy—

"Can you open it?" whispered Nikki.

Ellery set the heels of his hands on the edge of the lid and got his shoulders ready. The lid cracked off like a rotten nutshell.

Nikki gulped. The celestial egg

was sunny-side up now, and beneath it a million little frying lights danced.

The chest was heaped with jewels.

"Diamonds," said Nikki dreamily. "Rubies. Emeralds. Pearls. Sapphires. So pretty. Look, Ellery. The booty of a real pirate. Wrenched from the throats and arms of dead Spanish women—"

"And the jewels in turn wrenched from their settings," muttered Ellery, "most of which were probably melted down. But here are some they overlooked. An empty gold setting. A silver one—"

"Here are more silver ones, Ellery . . ."

"Those aren't silver." Ellery picked one up. "This is platinum, Nikki."

"And look at those old coins! What's this one?"

"What?"

"This coin!"

"Oh? *El peso duro*. A piece of eight."

"Gosh . . ." Nikki suddenly thrust both hands into the chest.

And at this precise moment, through the young air of the island's morning, there came a dull crack, like the faraway slam of a door, and quickly after—so quickly it sounded like an echo of the first—another.

Ellery vaulted across the hole and leaped onto the flat rock. "Nikki, those were gunshots—"

"Huh?" Nikki was still on a

quarterdeck with her jewels. "But Ellery—the treasure! You can't leave—"

But Ellery was gone.

They found Eric Ericsson in a robe and slippers lying in the doorway of Captain Kidd's roost, across the sill. He had tumbled headfirst into the empty room. In his right hand there was a .38 automatic pistol.

When they turned him over they saw a red hole in his forehead and red thickening fluid on the floor where the forehead had rested.

His body was still warm.

Ellery got up, and he said to the Hobbes-Watkinses and the marble-faced girl and the one-legged caretaker and Nikki, "We will go downstairs now and we will bar the tower door." So they went downstairs quietly, and Ellery excused himself for a moment and disappeared in his room, and when he appeared again he had a police revolver in his hand. "Nikki, you and Inga will take the launch and go over to the mainland and notify the Coast Guard and the Suffolk County police; there's no phone here. You won't come back until someone in authority can come with you. You gentlemen will wait here with me—with me, that is, and my shooting iron."

Late that day Ellery came down-

stairs from the tower room and conferred with the Coast Guard officer and the police captain from the mainland. Finally he said, "I appreciate that. It's something I owe poor Ericsson," and he waited until the people were brought in and seated before him.

The hearty bloat had gone out of Colonel Hobbes-Watkins; it was supplanted wholly by the muscular alertness Ellery had glimpsed the day before. Tony Hobbes-Watkins was very still, but he was no longer remotely languid. Inga was the palest projection of herself. Even Long John jiggled his peg nervously.

"Fifteen minutes or so after sunrise this morning," Ellery began, "just about the time I was down at the beach opening the treasure chest, Eric Ericsson was climbing the stairs in this house to the tower room. He was in his robe and slippers, and he carried his .38 automatic, with a full clip. His bedroom is below the tower shaft, which acts as an amplifier; evidently he was awakened by some noise from the tower room and decided to investigate. He took a gun with him because, even in his own house, he was afraid to be without it."

"I say—" began the Colonel furiously; but he did not say after all, he wiped the rolls on his neck.

"Someone was in the tower room. What was this person doing there—at dawn, in an empty room? There

is only one thing of utility in that room—the peephole. I punctured through the wall last night. The person Ericsson heard was watching me through the peephole. Watching me dig up the treasure."

They stared at him.

"Ericsson came to the landing and flung open the door. The man at the peephole whirled. Maybe they talked for a little while; maybe Ericsson was put off his guard. His gun came down, and the man across the room whipped out a revolver and fired a .25 caliber bullet into Ericsson's head, killing him instantly. But Ericsson's automatic had come up again instinctively as his murderer drew, and it went off, too—a split-second after the murderer's. We know two shots were fired almost simultaneously because Miss Porter and I heard them, and because we found a .25 caliber bullet in Ericsson's head and a .38 shell on the floor near Ericsson's .38 automatic."

And Ellery said clearly, "This murderer ran down the tower stairs after the shots, heard the others coming—you'd all been awakened by the shots and dashed out of your rooms at once, you've said—realized he was trapped, and thereupon did the only thing he could: he pretended that he, too, had been awakened by the shots and he ran *back* up the stairs with the rest of you. The gun he managed to dispose of before I got back to the house from the beach.

"One of you," said Ellery, "was that murderer.

"Which one was it?"

There was no sound in the room at all.

"We found the empty shell of Ericsson's discharged cartridge, as I say, near his body. He had fired once at his murderer, his automatic had ejected the shell, and the bullet had sped on its way.

"But here is the interesting fact: *We haven't found Ericsson's bullet.*"

Ellery leaned their way. "The tower room has been gone over all day by these officers and me. The bullet isn't there. There is no sign of it or its passage anywhere in the room—floor, walls, ceiling. The windows remain intact. They weren't open at the time of Ericsson's shot; as you remarked yesterday, Inga, they've been stuck fast for generations; and when we tried to open them today without breaking something, we failed.

"Nor did Ericsson's shot go wild. He was killed instantly, falling into the room headfirst; this means that when he fired, he was facing into the room. But just to be thorough, we went over the landing and the tower shaft, too. No bullet, no bullet mark, and no slightest opening through which the bullet might have passed."

"The peephole!" Nikki said involuntarily.

"No. There is considerable thickness to the walls. Ericsson in the doorway was at an extremely acute

angle to the peephole. So while the bullet conceivably might have passed through the opening of the hole inside the tower room, it would have to have lodged inside the wall, or at least left some sign of its passage if it went clear through. We've torn down part of the wall to get a look inside. There is no bullet and no mark of a bullet.

"So the extraordinary fact is that while Ericsson's bullet must have struck something in that room, there is no sign of its having done so.

"Impossible? No.

"There is one logical explanation."

And Ellery said, "The bullet must have struck the only thing in that room which left it—the murderer. *One of you is concealing a bullet wound.*"

Ellery turned to the silent officers. "Let's have these three men stripped to the skin. And Nikki," he added, "you go somewhere with Inga—yes, I said Inga!—and do likewise."

And when the Colonel, raging, had been reduced to his fundamental pinkness, and his intent son stood similarly unclothed, and when what there was of Long John was grimly revealed also—and no wound was found on any of them, not so much as a scratch—Ellery merely blinked and faced the door through which Nikki had

taken the murdered man's niece, the heir to his fortune and the treasure.

And the men redressed quickly, as if time were at their heels.

And when Nikki came back with Inga the police captain asked, "Where is Mrs. Hobbes-Watkins's wound, Miss Porter?"

"Mrs. Hobbes-Watkins," replied Nikki, "has no wound."

"No . . .?"

"Maybe," said the Coast Guard officer awkwardly, "maybe you didn't look—uh—"

"And maybe I did," said Nikki with a sweet smile. "I work for the great Ellery Queen . . . you know?"

So now the two officers turned to look at the great Ellery Queen, but with no appreciation of his greatness at all.

And the Coast Guard officer said, "Well," and the police captain from the mainland did not say even that but turned on his heel.

He turned immediately back. For Ellery was growling, "If that's the case, it's obvious who killed Ericsson."

And Ellery produced a cigarette and a lighter and went to work on them, and then he said, "It all goes back to what I dug up this morning. And what did I dig up? An old chest, some old coins, a great number of unmounted gems, and some empty gem settings. Nikki, you saw the empty settings. Of

which materials were they made?"

"Gold, silver, platinum—"

"Platinum," said Ellery, and he waved his cigarette gently. "The metal platinum wasn't introduced into Europe until about 1750—*over fifty years after Kidd supposedly buried the chestful of jewels on this island*. It's even worse than that: *Platinum wasn't used for jewel settings until the year 1900*, at which time Kidd had been dead a hundred and ninety-nine years.

"A phony, gentlemen. A plant. The while thing.

"The 'treasure' I unearthed this morning was buried in that sand very recently. I'm afraid. It has no more connection with William Kidd or any other seventeenth century pirate than the loose change in my pocket. Oh, it was meant to be taken for a treasure Kidd buried—the chest is authentically old, and some old coins were strewn among the jewels. But the jewels, as proved by those platinum settings, are modern.

"Why should modern jewels be buried on an island in the guise of old pirate treasure? Well, suppose they were stolen property. As stolen property, they'd have to be disposed of through fences for a small proportion of their value. But as buried treasure they could be disposed of openly at market prices. Very clever.

"Eric Ericsson, gentlemen, suspected that Anthony Hobbes-Watkins and his 'father,' Colonel

Hobbes-Watkins—who's probably not his father at all—were not what they seemed. He was tragically right—they're a pair of European jewel thieves and, from the size of their accumulations, they must hold some sort of record for prowess in their exacting profession.

"They were cooling off in the Bahamas, wondering how best to turn their loot into cash, when Eric Ericsson and his niece stopped over at New Providence Island for a visit. Hearing the purely mythical yarn about how Kidd had buried treasure on Ericsson's Island two hundred and fifty years ago, these worthies thought of a remarkably ingenious idea. They would plant the jewels in a real old chest—the Bahamas were the headquarters of the buccaneers and are full of pirate relics; they would salt the stolen jewels with a few authentic old coins; and they would bury the chest on Ericsson's Island, to be 'discovered' by them at a later date. The plan revolved about Inga's infatuation for this fellow here; he pretended to reciprocate her love and he married her. As Ericsson's sole heir, Inga would inherit his entire estate, which included this island, when Ericsson died. And as Inga's husband, Tony Hobbes-Watkins would control it all, and when Inga died—an early and untimely death, eh, gentlemen?—our friends would be in the rosy clear . . . I'm sorry, Inga, but it seems to be a day for crushing blows."

Inga sat pallid and blank, her hand clutching Nikki's.

"If you're trying to pin Ericsson's murder on me—" began the younger man in a swift and nasal voice.

But the Colonel said harshly, "Be quiet."

"Oh, that?" said Ellery. "Let's see. We know that Ericsson's bullet struck his murderer. Yet none of his four possible murderers exhibits a wound. Obviously, the bullet buried itself in a part of the murderer which couldn't be wounded—" Ellery smiled—"which couldn't be wounded because it's not flesh and blood. Only one of you four fits that curious specification. The one who uses a wooden leg to compensate for his—*Stop him!*"

And when they had subdued the struggling caretaker and dug Eric Ericsson's bullet out of the pegleg, the police captain—who was glassy-eyed—said, "Then these two men here, Mr. Queen . . . they weren't in on Ericsson's murder . . .?"

"The whole plot, Captain, was geared to Ericsson's murder," said Ellery with a shrug, "though I'm afraid Long John rather jumped the gun."

"Don't you see that they were all in the plot together? How could our friend the Colonel, when he left the Bahamas after the wedding to smuggle the jewels into the States and get it to Ericsson's Island before the others sailed up to join him—how, I say, could the Colonel have planted the chest on the island

unless the caretaker was taken in to the gang? Also, the stage had to be set for the 'discovery' of the treasure: a hole bored through the tower room wall to sight on the chosen spot, the wallpaper doctored to implement the mythical clue of 'the needle's eye,' and so on—none of it possible unless Long John were declared in. He was, I suppose, to be paid off when Ericsson was disposed of and they got control, through Inga, of the island.

"What these gentry didn't figure on was the stupidity and avarice of Long John. They're far too clever operators to have planned to kill Ericsson the very night the treasure was located. Even if that had been their plan, they'd hardly have devised such a crude and obvious murder—especially with a trained investigator on the island. An 'accident' would have been more their style. At their leisure, under selected conditions . . . like a storm, say, and an overturned boat . . . perhaps even with Inga a victim of the same accident, in that way gain-

ing their objective in one stroke and with no danger.

"But Long John is simple-minded and, as Ericsson told me, a miser. He just couldn't wait. He heard me leave in the dark, realized my purpose, saw the dawn coming up, and hurried to the tower room to spy on me. He watched me dig the jewels up, probably saw them sparkling in the sun. When Ericsson surprised him in the tower at that very moment, all he could see were those jewels and his share of them when Ericsson should be killed. So Long John killed him—then and there. Speeding up the great day . . .

"Haste makes waste, eh, Colonel? And Tony, I regret to inform you that I'm going to take your wife to the best lawyer in New York and see what can be done about an immediate annulment.

"And now, gentlemen, if you'll remove these pirates," said Ellery to the officers, but looking soberly at Inga, "Nikki and I have some holes to refill."

Will Scott

Clue in Blue

Will Scott is not well-known to American readers, even though he has probably had more short stories published than any living writer—well into his second thousand! A tremendous background of experience—so when Mr. Scott says he abhors the straightforward detective story, it behooves us to listen. Here is one of Mr. Scott's finest tales—judge for yourself if it isn't light-years away from the cut-and-dried whodunit . . .

EDGAR COPPEL WAS OUT OF THE world for two whole weeks. He had grown sick of the world and the horrible monotony of every day.

The only thing in Edgar Coppel's life that ever seemed to change was the number on the big round calendar on the office wall: 4, 5, 6. . . . And even that could get no further than '31, but had to start all over again at 1 till you wanted to take a ledger and smash it to bits. Which, of course, you couldn't do. The big round calendar belonged to the Firm. Just as the ledger belonged to the Firm. Just as Edgar Coppel belonged to the Firm.

"Is Mr. Hepplewhite in, please?" "What name?" "Brown." "Will you sit down? I will see if Mr. Hepplewhite can see you." Out through the glass door. In through the glass door. "Will you come this way, please. Mr. Hepplewhite will see you."

Years of that. Asking people with names like Brown to sit down. Pretending that Mr. Hepplewhite might be too busy to see them. Going out through the glass door. Coming back. Asking people with names like Brown to come this way, please. Years . . .

Nothing of a life. But then it was nothing of a world. Edgar Coppel didn't want to change his bit of the world for any other bit. He loathed the lot of it. He loathed everything he read in his newspaper. That was what they called in stories Life with a capital L. He knew that his little career was just a cage. But who in his senses would want to fly out of a cage to the kind of freedom you read about in newspapers?

"Thousands sleep in the open on Southend beach." "Shop murder in Hornsey. Hammer clue." "Her legs insured for twenty thousand." "Paris talks resumed today." "Flat murder in Whitehaven.

Number-plate clue." "Geneva talks suspended." "Heath murder." "Berlin talks." "Houseboat murder." "Thousand sleep in the open on Margate sands."

Edgar Coppel used to say that he could tell you, any January, what would be in any paper the following December.

He didn't know what to do about it. He didn't know where to go. He knew where he *would* go, when the fortnight in September came round. Margate or Bognor or Crömer or somewhere. Just where made no difference. It meant a pier and colored fairy lamps and lodgings where they weren't too civil by the end of the first week.

It meant this year's concert party with last year's jokes. It meant a confounded umbrella all the time, in case it rained. It meant dozens of postcards, written on your knee with your back against a slimy groyne that ruined your new sports jacket—postcards to people you'd love to offend, but who would be offended if you didn't send them a postcard.

And it meant more newspapers. You *had* to buy them at the seaside, for want of something better to do. Buy them and sit on a deck-chair for twopence and curse them because of what was in them. "Foreign Secretary snapped last evening on his departure for Monte Carlo talks." "Forest murder. Bus-ticket clue."

A fortnight in September. That's

when he'd go. That's what he'd do.

And then, so suddenly that it almost startled him, he said, "Will I?" And then he said, "No, I'm damned if I do! Not again!"

And when the time came he pushed a toothbrush and his shaving things into a little tin box, put the tin box in his pocket, made sure he'd got his money, and went.

He just went.

He hadn't a map. He hadn't an idea. The first night he got as far as Epping Forest, and slept behind a haystack. Ever since he was a small boy he had read of men sleeping behind haystacks. Now he had done it himself, and liked it. No gas to turn off, no dog to put in the kitchen, no door to lock. Just down and straight to sleep. He liked it exceedingly.

After the first day he never knew where he was. He lived on bread and cheese, or whatever they had, in country pubs. Sometimes he slept in the pubs. If there wasn't a pub handy, when night came, he would find another haystack, or a dry ditch, or a ruined barn. For the first time in his life he began to find it difficult to spend money.

He occupied an hour one afternoon at a forge in the middle of Essex, finding out that shoeing a horse wasn't as easy as it looked; and he passed a whole afternoon in a large field learning about the harvesting of clover.

When in a village he approached

the little newsagent's, with its colored contents bills outside, he always turned aside and gave it a miss. Paris could talk, clues be found in ravines, men break the record to the Cape by six hours less than other men: he didn't want to know. He didn't want *news*. There was no news in the country pubs; nothing about Paris talks, nothing about insuring legs for twenty thousand, nothing about clues. Only urgent excitements about what they were going to do if there wasn't rain in twenty-four hours, and what old Pete was going to do now that his rick was burned.

On the thirteenth day, at sunset, he found himself on the top of the hill behind Benfleet. He didn't know it was Benfleet till a signpost told him. He had not known he was near the river. Of signposts he had seen little for many days.

The new Southend road was fifty yards away, with its procession of impatient cars, its noise, its twinkling junction lights, and a long billboard shrieking a red and blue message to tell Edgar Coppel he had left shoemsmiths and clover fields behind and was back again in civilization.

PLAZA. ANN CAREY IN *Forgotten Lives*.

The same old world. . . .

He was in the corner of a field, his back propped against an old gate. All the shape had gone out of his suit. The heels of his shoes were

down to the uppers, and the sole of one was cracked across. He did not care a straw. The day after tomorrow he would have to be spick and span for the Firm. For thirty hours or so he could still be as he liked for himself.

There was a wind from the river, and it blew a sheet of newspaper over a hedge and across the field, to come to rest against his foot. He did not stir to reach it. Enough of that sort of thing after the thirty hours. Paris would still be talking; clues would still be coming to light in luggage offices and garages; somebody would still be flying to the Cape in two days less than somebody else.

He turned, and the tin box in his pocket rattled. For some days it had been rattling, annoying him. He had meant to pack it, somehow. He took it out of his pocket and opened it, reached to his foot and plucked the sheet of newspaper from its resting place. He folded the sheet of newspaper into a pad and thrust the pad into the gap made by a toothbrush which was too long for its fellows in the tin box and a shaving-stick which was growing too short. He shook the box. It did not rattle now. He put it in his pocket.

The sun went down behind London, a crimson ball in a field of smoky slate. Dusk fell and with it the red letters on the long billboard turned to black, the letters faded to nothing.

LAZA. NN CAREY N' *orgotten*
ives.

That interested him for a moment. He wondered why it happened. But only for a moment. For the first time since he had started his eventless adventure, there was a chill in the air. It was coming up from the river. He rose and stretched the cramp out of his legs. He turned his back on the new Southend road and shuffled along a little lane. In half a mile he came to a sleepy inn. Here was a simple meal for him, and the promise of a bed. The momentary reminder of Talks and Speed and Insured Legs and the glass door was forgotten. He sat in the bar parlor, eating his bread and cheese and listening to the facts, from one who knew, about the dry summer of '87, when the pond dried right up.

By ten o'clock he was ready for upstairs. He ran his hand across the stubble on his chin. He had half a mind to shave before retiring, and so start his last day without even that responsibility. He thought it over, and liked the idea better than ever.

"Any hopes of a jug of hot water?" he asked the landlord.

"Anything we've got if you can wait, mister," said the landlord.

"I can wait," Edgar Coppel nodded.

And at twenty past ten, in front of a mirror covered with brown blotches, with his tin box on one corner of an ancient dressing-table

and a jug of hot water on the other, he began his shave, by candlelight.

He was happy and depressed together. Happy in the shortening present, depressed at the prospect of the imminent glass door and the hundreds of people with names such as Brown who would be wanting to see Mr. Hepplewhite.

The shave over, he replaced his things in the tin box and sat on the edge of the bed, stroking his smooth chin and looking at the parts of his face which missed the brown blotches of the old mirror. The shave had refreshed him. He no longer felt sleepy. But there was nothing to do, nobody to talk to.

On the dressing-table was the folded pad of newspaper. Edgar Coppel looked farther. Three or four books rested untidily on a home-made shelf. He rose and read the titles. Trash, as he might have expected. Turning, he noticed the newspaper, unfolded it, and spread it out on the bed. It would be, he knew, nothing but the same old nonsense; but there was nothing else to help him pass half an hour. The sheet was page twelve from the *Sunday Sphere* of that week, and it did contain, as he had been so certain it would, nothing but the same old nonsense.

Continued from page one.

SUMMING-UP IN CASSIDY CASE

PRISONER'S OUTBURST AT SENTENCE
OF DEATH

"MY LIFE SWORN AWAY BY LIARS!"

The final scenes in the trial of Herman Cassidy for the murder of Peter Bond in a barn on the outskirts of Cromer . . .

It has been said that the evidence in this case is purely circumstantial. Up to a point, this is true. But the testimony of the witness Woodward has not been shaken by the defense. The accused has sworn that on the evening and at the time of the crime he was on the yacht Mayfly, anchored off Cromer. He was, he asserts, asleep below decks. The defense has been unable to confirm this alibi, because, they say, Cassidy was the only man on the yacht at the time. In this, you may think, the accused has been merely unfortunate.

The witness Woodward has sworn that on the evening and at the time of the crime he saw the accused leave the barn. Cassidy was personally unknown to him, but the name of the Mayfly, knitted in pale blue letters on the front of Cassidy's white sweater, was plainly seen by him. At the identity parade Woodward picked out Cassidy at once. Cassidy is a man of striking appearance, quite unlike any other member of the little crew

If Woodward's testimony were not supported by the other evidence, or if you had to consider the other evidence alone, without Woodward's testimony, you might be justified . . .

But you must be satisfied in

your minds, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the foul deed perpetrated in the barn in the dusk of that July night . . .

Edgar Coppel found himself yawning.

He let the sheet slide to the floor, undressed, blew out the candle, and got into bed. In less than a minute he was asleep.

The next morning he was up as early as the landlord, too early for breakfast. For want of something better to do he walked lazily down the lane to the Southend road, empty and quiet at this time of the morning. He propped his elbows on the top bar of a gate and stood staring at nothing.

PLAZA. ANN CAREY IN *Forgotten Lives*.

Afterwards he told himself that he never really thought it out. It seemed to happen inside his head, as though somebody other than he were arranging a puzzle.

Daylight: PLAZA. ANN CAREY IN *Forgotten Lives*.

Dusk: LAZA. NN AREY *orgotten ives*.

Funny. . . . The first letter of each word was in a palish blue; the rest in bright red. Easy to look at now; but the evening before, in the fading light, the red letters had turned to black, the blue letters had vanished.

He recalled something from his boyhood days, when he had his first little "pinhole" camera and could not understand why girls in

red dresses always "came out" in black dresses, whereas girls in blue dresses always "came out" in white. Somebody had once tried to explain it to him, but he could never take it in.

Strolling back up the lane another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

... if you had to consider the other evidence alone, without Woodward's testimony ...

"Oh!" said Edgar Coppel.

... the name of the Mayfly, knitted in pale blue letters on the front of Cassidy's white sweater, was plainly seen by him ...

"H'm!" said Edgar Coppel.

... in the dusk of that July night

"Here!" said Edgar Coppel. And he put on a bit of speed and got back to the inn as quickly as he could.

"Breakfast won't be long," said the landlord.

"Any time for me," said Edgar Coppel.

He hurried upstairs to the little bedroom where he had left his hat and groped on the floor for the sheet out of the previous Sunday's *Sunday Sphere*. He sat on the edge of the bed and picked bits out of the report of the Cassidy trial. Not since he was a boy had he felt so strangely excited.

Yes! It all seemed to depend on the man Woodward—on his picking out the name Mayfly on Cassidy's sweater and thus leading the

police to the yacht. And, afterwards, the identity parade . . . But in the first place it was Woodward's word for it that he had seen the name of the boat on Cassidy's sweater at the door of the barn. And if Woodward hadn't . . .

Edgar Coppel turned back and read bits again. *Blue letters—dusk*—and the width of a lane between Woodward and the man who came out of the barn . . .

Edgar Coppel laid the paper aside and tried to think.

If Woodward hadn't seen the name Mayfly on Cassidy's sweater—if he *couldn't*—then Woodward was lying, and the whole case against Cassidy went to pieces. And if the letters were really blue—pale blue—and it was really dusk. . . .

"Perhaps," said Edgar Coppel, "it's only a certain kind of blue. Perhaps the letters on that poster were of the certain kind, and other kinds—" And then, again, he recalled the blue dresses of his little girl friends that always "came out" white.

He found himself staring at the old books on the home-made shelf. Some were in blue binding, some in red. Here, in the light of morning, they looked blue and red. He rose and took down three of them one in red, one in light blue, one in dark blue. He drew the curtains across the window and opened the door of the old-fashioned wardrobe. In the gloom of the ward-

robe he held out the three books. The red book looked dark, the dark blue book looked dark, the light blue book looked pale. Not so pale as to be colorless, but then this was not dusk. Perhaps it was the dusk that was wanted to complete the illusion—something in the light of the sky, or in the air.

He looked at the newspaper report again. Pale blue letters, it said. And dusk . . .

LAZA. NN AREY N *orgotten ives.*

There was no doubt about *that*, anyway. Perhaps it did require a certain kind of blue—a greenish blue, or a yellowish blue, or something. But it began to look as if *any* kind of light blue, at the distance of the width of a lane, in the dusk, would be pretty hard to see.

... if you had to consider the other evidence alone, without Woodward's testimony . . .

"I ought to see somebody!" thought Edgar Coppel.

In the middle of the newspaper sheet was a little "box" in which were set out the names of the judge, counsel for the prosecution and defense, and solicitors.

Simnel and Smith, solicitors for the accused.

He ate his breakfast slowly and thoughtfully. It was a very peculiar position for him to be in. If he had never noticed this strange trick which fading daylight played with light blue, all kinds of things might

have gone wrong. Why had he not noticed it before? Perhaps it was one of those things that you noticed and didn't notice.

Like the way you read only the top half of a row of letters. You could lay a piece of paper across the bottom half of a row of letters and read every word in the row. But cover up the top half and try to read the words *then*. You couldn't. He had read that once, in a magazine, and tried it for himself. There must be lots of funny little things like that, if only you could find them out.

You *couldn't* see pale blue in the dusk, you *could* see red twice as strong. He'd found that out.

Very well. If the dusk that fateful evening at Cromier had been sufficiently dusky, if the blue letters on Cassidy's sweater had been sufficiently blue, and if, therefore, Woodward could not have seen what he said he had seen, there was no real proof that Cassidy had been anywhere near the barn at the time of the murder.

"I ought to see somebody!" Edgar Coppel repeated.

It was an odd state of affairs. Our Mr. Coppel, of Hepplewhite's office, suddenly blossoming forth in the newspapers as the man who saved another from the gallows by the merest chance. . . .

"Simnel and Smith," said Mr. Coppel. "They'll be able to find out just how dusky it was, and

how pale the letters on the sweater are. The police will have the sweater, no doubt. They can experiment. *We* can experiment."

He settled his modest bill at the inn, walked to Benfleet station, and took the first train to town. Nobody took the slightest notice of him. To the passers-by he was just a shabby young man. This made him smile. They did not *know*.

He was home just after lunch-time, his holiday cut short by this new excitement. He bathed, changed, and became our spruce Mr. Coppel again, but our Mr. Coppel with a new fire in his eye. At three o'clock that afternoon he was in the outer office of Simnel and Smith, solicitors, and Simnel and Smith's own particular Mr. Coppel (who looked as if his name might be Brown) was trying to get out of our Mr. Coppel the nature of the business that had brought him there, before troubling either Mr. Simnel or Mr. Smith about it.

"I'm sorry," said Edgar Coppel firmly.

The man behind the counter pulled his lower lip and glanced at a clock. Both the heads of the firm were always so very busy.

Edgar Coppel pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen. On the paper he wrote *Cassidy case—important information*.

"Give that to Mr. Simnel or Mr. Smith," he said, folding the paper and handing it to the clerk:

The clerk sighed, went out through a glass door, came back again with raised eyebrows, and said, "Will you come this way, please. Mr. Simnel will see you."

Mr. Simnel saw Mr. Coppel. A puzzled Mr. Simnel.

"Mr.—er—Coppel?" said Mr. Simnel.

"That's right," said Mr. Coppel.

Mr. Simnel was still holding the slip of paper.

"The Cassidy case," he said quietly. "You—er—you say here. . . ." He trailed off to silence and looked at Mr. Coppel.

Mr. Coppel stated his case, ticking his points off on the ends of his fingers and quoting from the judge's summing-up. He stated his case, as Mr. Simnel admitted (though not aloud), very well, making his last point clearly—that all the other evidence depended on the evidence of the witness Woodward, and that the evidence of the witness Woodward depended on the fact that the name on the sweater of the man he said he had seen coming out of the barn was the name of the yacht *Mayfly*.

"In that," said Mr. Coppel, "Woodward went to the police, and the police went to the *Mayfly*. The rest followed. But the rest would not have followed if Woodward had not seen the name *Mayfly* on the man's sweater. *And suppose he didn't?*"

Mr. Simnel blinked.

"Please proceed," he begged.

"If he didn't," Mr. Coppel proceeded, "perhaps he didn't see a sweater. Perhaps he didn't see a man. It was Cassidy's weapon, true. But weapons can be stolen—'planted,' don't you call it? If Woodward couldn't see the name on the sweater the whole thing looks like a plot. Against Cassidy."

Mr. Simnel blinked again and looked more puzzled than ever.

"If Woodward *couldn't* see the name?"

"The evidence is," said Coppel, "that it was dusk, that there were no street lamps, that there was the width of a lane between the two men, and that the name on Cassidy's sweater was knitted in pale blue wool."

"Well?" said Mr. Simnel.

Mr. Coppel, thoroughly warmed up, rose and looked around.

"Excuse me," he said. And to Mr. Simnel's astonishment he picked up two books from Mr. Simnel's desk and suddenly drew the curtain across Mr. Simnel's window.

"This is not exactly dusk," said Mr. Coppel, "but it will give you the idea." Then he realized for the first time that he was not conducting himself quite as our Mr. Coppel of Hepplewhite's office should. "Give you the idea, sir," he amended.

He held up the two books in a dark corner of the room, but in front of a white blotter:

"This book in my left hand is a pale blue book," he said. "The one in my right hand is a bright red book. Can you see the pale blue book against the white blotter in this light, sir?"

"Scarcely at all," Mr. Simnel admitted.

"And the red book, sir?"

"Plainly. It looks almost black."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Coppel. "So that if, instead of being books, these were *words*, you wouldn't be able to make out the pale blue ones at all."

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Simnel. "How very extraordinary!"

Thus encouraged, Edgar Coppel told of his discovery on the South-end road the night before, when ANN CAREY had changed to NN AREY before his eyes as the dusk fell.

"It all depends, you see, sir," he said, "on the—er—duskiness of the dusk and the paleness of the blue. It all depends in the Cassidy case, that is. If we could make certain."

"Excuse me," said Mr. Simnel, himself now very red about the cheekbones. And he went out of the room, muttering "Extraordinary!" to himself.

It was nearly ten minutes before he returned.

"Quite pale blue, the letters on the sweater," he said. "I've had it looked up. And the dusk must have been pretty advanced, because Woodward's tale was that, although he was not hiding in any

way, Cassidy did not see him."

"It's lucky, sir, don't you think," said Edgar Coppel, "that I was on the Southend road last night?"

"Lucky?" echoed Mr. Simnel.

"For Cassidy."

"For Cassidy?"

"Well. . . ." Edgar Coppel stopped, fumbling for a way to say it that did not make him sound too much the hero. "Things can't be left *here*, can they, sir?"

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Simnel.

"If Woodward is lying," said Edgar Coppel, "it upsets the whole case, sir, doesn't it?"

For a time so long that it made Edgar Coppel blush, Mr. Simnel sat looking at his visitor. Then he looked away and tapped the edge of his desk.

"I don't—I don't quite. . ." he began unsuccessfully. Then he looked up at Edgar Coppel again. "Where did you hear about this?" he asked.

"Sunday's paper," replied the now bewildered Edgar Coppel.

"*Sunday Sphere*?"

"That's right, sir."

"You read it?"

"Yes, sir."

"But—" This seemed to be too much for Mr. Simnel. He opened the door of his office, gave an order, waited a moment, and then came back to his desk with a copy of the previous Sunday's issue of the *Sunday Sphere*.

"You read it, you say?"

"Yes, sir," Edgar Coppel answered. He could not for the life of him understand what had come over Mr. Simnel, of Simnel and Smith. Of course he had read it!

"That is—" he said.

"Well?" said Mr. Simnel.

"Part of it," Edgar Coppel confessed.

Mr. Simnel stared and then suddenly became alive. He opened the *Sunday Sphere* at page twelve.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Edgar Coppel. And he had to explain that he had been holidaying far from civilization and newspapers, and that a stray sheet had blown against his foot the night before.

"I see," said Mr. Simnel. There was understanding in his eyes now, but there was more, and this something more startled Mr. Coppel.

"It says here," said Mr. Simnel, pointing to the top of the page, "*Continued from page one.*"

"I noticed that," said Mr. Coppel.

"And on page one it says—"

Mr. Simnel handed the paper to Edgar Coppel, folded at page one. And Edgar Coppel read:

Famous Trials of the Past: No. 6.

THE CASSIDY CASE

THE MURDER IN THE BARN

AT CROMER

At the Old Bailey, before Mr. Justice Stretton, on the third of October, 1886 . . .

"I—" murmured Edgar Coppel, his face redder than ever.

"The Mr. Simnel mentioned in the paper here was my father," Mr. Simnel explained.

Edgar Coppel's face changed slowly from red to an unpleasant gray.

"So that even if I'm right—"

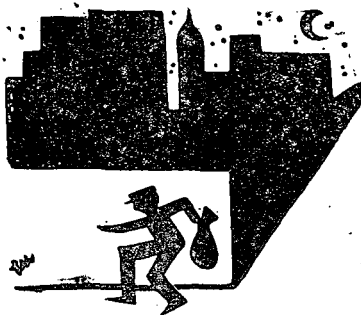
"As you may be," sighed Mr.

Simnel. "As we may still be able to demonstrate you are. Nevertheless . . . Well, you see."

"Sixty-four years too late, you mean, sir?" said Edgar Coppel, groping for his hat.

"Sixty-four years too late," Mr. Simnel nodded.

"I see, sir," said Edgar Coppel, sighing.



Rex Stout

Murder on Tuesday

How better to close an EQ anthology than with another "paint-fresh" and sparkling short novel about Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin . . . Rex Stout once reminded us that none of his biographical write-ups ever mentions his prowess as a gardener; and indeed it is well-known that Mr. Stout, emulating Wilkie Collins' Sergeant Cuff (whose hobby was roses) and his own Nero Wolfe (whose hobby is orchids), is "the best d—— gardener south of the North Pole" when it comes to the rarer varieties of roses and iris . . .

AMONG THE KINDS OF MEN I HAVE a prejudice against are the ones named Eugene. There's no use asking me why, because I admit it's a prejudice. It may be that when I was in kindergarten out in Ohio a man named Eugene stole candy from me, but, if so, I have forgotten all about it. For all practical purposes, it is merely one facet of my complex character that I do not like men named Eugene.

That, and that alone, accounted for my offish attitude when Mr. and Mrs. Eugene R. Poor called at Nero Wolfe's office that Tuesday afternoon in October, because I had never seen or heard of the guy before, and neither had Wolfe.

The appointment had been made by phone that morning, so I was prejudiced before I ever got a look at him. The look hadn't swayed me much one way or the other. He

wasn't too old to remember what his wife had given him on his fortieth birthday, but neither was he young enough to be still looking forward to it. Nothing about him stood out. His face was taken at random out of stock, with no alterations. Gray herringbone suits like his were that afternoon being bought in stores from San Diego to Bangor. Really, his only distinction was that they had named him Eugene.

In spite of which I was regarding him with polite curiosity, for he had just told Nero Wolfe that he was going to be murdered by his partner, a man named Conroy Blaney.

I was sitting at my desk in the room Nero Wolfe used for an office in his home on West 35th Street, and Wolfe was behind his desk, arranged in a chair that had been

especially constructed to support up to a quarter of a ton, which was not utterly beyond the limits of possibility. Eugene R. Poor was in the red leather chair a short distance beyond Wolfe's desk, with a little table smack against its right arm for the convenience of clients in writing checks. Mrs. Poor was on a spare between her husband and me.

I might mention that I was not aware of any prejudice against Mrs. Poor. For one thing, there was no reason to suppose that her name was Eugene. For another, there were several reasons to suppose that her fortieth birthday would not come before mine, though she was good and mature. She had by no means struck me dumb, but there are people who seem to improve a room just by being in it.

Naturally, Wolfe was scowling. He shook his head, moving it a full half-inch right and left, which was, for him, a frenzy of negation.

"No, sir," he said emphatically. "I suppose two hundred men and women have sat in that chair, Mr. Poor, and tried to hire me to keep someone from killing them." His eyes switched to me. "How many, Archie?"

I said, to oblige him, "Two hundred and nine."

"Have I taken the jobs?"

"No, sir. Never."

He wiggled a finger at Eugene. "For two million dollars a year you can make it fairly difficult for a man to kill you. That's about what

it costs to protect a president or a king, and even so, consider the record. Of course, if you give up all other activity it can be done more cheaply, say, forty thousand a year. A cave in a mountainside, never emerging, with six guards and a staff to suit—"

Eugene was trying to get something in. He finally did: "I don't expect you to keep him from killing me. That's not what I came for."

"Then what the deuce did you come for?"

"To keep him from getting away with it." Eugene cleared his throat. "I was trying to tell you. I agree that you can't stop him; I don't see how anybody can. Sooner or later. He's a clever man." His voice took on bitterness: "Too damn' clever for me, and I wish I'd never met him. Sure, I know a man can kill a man if he once decides to, but Con Blaney is so damn' clever that it isn't a question whether he can kill me or not; the question is whether he can manage it so that he is in the clear. I'm afraid he can. I would bet he can. And I don't want him to."

His wife made a little noise, and he stopped to look at her. Then he shook his head at her as if she had said something, took a cigar from his vest pocket, removed the band, inspected first one end and then the other to decide which was which, got a gadget from another vest pocket and snipped one of the ends, and lit up. He no sooner had

it lit than it slipped out of his mouth, bounced on his thigh, and landed on the rug. He retrieved the cigar from the floor, and got his teeth sunk in it.

"So," I thought to myself, "you're not so doggone calm about getting murdered as you were making out."

"So I came," he told Wolfe, "to give you the facts, to get the facts down, and to pay you five thousand dollars to see that he doesn't manage it that way." The cigar between his teeth interfered with his talking, and he took it out of his mouth. "If he kills me I'll be dead. I want someone to know about it."

Wolfe's eyes had gone half shut. "But why pay me five thousand dollars in advance? Wouldn't someone know about it? Your wife, for instance?"

Eugene nodded. "I've thought about that. I've thought it all out. What if he kills her, too? I have no idea how he'll try to work it, or when, and who is there besides my wife whom I can absolutely trust? I'm not taking any chances. Of course, I thought of the police, but judging from my own experience, a couple of burglaries down at the shop, and, you know, the experiences of a businessman, I'm not sure they'd even remember I'd been there if it happened in a year or maybe two years." He stuck his cigar in his mouth, puffed twice, and took it out again. "What's the matter—don't you want five thousand dollars?"

Wolfe said gruffly, "I wouldn't get five thousand. This is October. As my income now stands, I'll keep about ten per cent of any additional receipts after paying taxes. Out of five thousand, five hundred would be mine. If Mr. Blaney is as clever as you think he is, I wouldn't consider trying to uncover him on a murder for five hundred dollars." He stopped and opened his eyes to glare at the wife. "May I ask, madam, what you are looking so pleased about?"

Wolfe couldn't stand to see a woman look pleased.

Mrs. Poor was regarding him with a little smile of obvious approval. "Because," she said, in a voice that was pleased too, and a nice voice, "I need help, and I think you're going to help me. I don't approve of this. I didn't want my husband to come here."

"Indeed. Where did you want him to go—to the Atlantic Detective Agency?"

"Oh, no; if I had been in favor of his going to any detective at all, of course it would have been Nero Wolfe. But—May I explain?"

Wolfe glanced at the clock on the wall. Three-forty. In twenty minutes he would be leaving for the plant-rooms on the roof, to indulge in his favorite hobby—monkeying around with orchids. Besides being a champion eater and drinker, Wolfe is the best orchid grower in New York. He said curtly, "I have eighteen minutes."

Eugene put in, with a determined voice, "Then I'm going to use them—" But his wife smiled him out of it. She went on to Wolfe: "It won't take that long. My husband and Mr. Blaney have been business partners for ten years. They own the firm of Blaney & Poor, manufacturers of novelties—you know—they make things like matches that won't strike and chairs with rubber legs and bottled drinks that taste like soap—"

"Good God," Wolfe muttered.

She ignored it. "It's the biggest firm in the business. Mr. Blaney gets the ideas and handles the production—he's a genius at it—and my husband handles the business part, sales and so on. But Mr. Blaney is really just about too conceited to live, and now that the business is a big success he thinks my husband isn't needed, and he wants him to get out and take twenty thousand dollars for his half. Of course, it's worth a great deal more than that—at least ten times as much—and my husband won't do it. Mr. Blaney is very conceited, and also he will not let anything stand in his way. The argument has gone on and on, until now my husband is convinced that Mr. Blaney is capable of doing anything to get rid of him."

"Of killing him. And you don't agree."

"Oh, no. I do agree. I think Mr. Blaney would stop at nothing."

"Has he made threats?"

She shook her head. "He isn't that kind. He doesn't make threats; he just goes ahead."

"Then why didn't you want your husband to come to me?"

"Because he's simply too stubborn to live." She smiled at Eugene to take out any sting, and back at Wolfe. "There's a clause in the partnership agreement—they signed it when they started in business—that says if either one of them dies, the other one owns the whole thing. That's another reason why my husband thinks Mr. Blaney will kill him, and I think so, too. But what my husband wants is to make sure Mr. Blaney gets caught—that's how stubborn he is—and what I want is for my husband to stay alive."

"Now, Martha," Eugene put in, "I came here to—"

So her name was Martha. I had no prejudice against women named Martha.

She kept the floor. "It's like this," she appealed to Wolfe. "My husband thinks that Mr. Blaney is determined to kill him if he can't get what he wants any other way, and I think so, too. You, yourself, think that if a man is determined to kill another man nothing can stop him. So isn't it perfectly obvious? My husband has over two hundred thousand dollars saved up outside the business, about half of it in bonds. He can get another twenty thousand from Mr. Blaney for his half of the business—"

"It's worth twenty times that," Eugene said savagely, showing real emotion for the first time.

"Not to you if you're dead," she snapped back at him, and went on to Wolfe: "With the income from that we could live more than comfortably—and happily. I hope my husband loves me—I *hope* he does—and I know I love him." She leaned forward in her chair. "That's why I came along today—I thought maybe you would help me persuade him. It isn't as if I wouldn't stand by my husband in a fight if there was any chance of his winning. But is there any sense in being so stubborn if you can't possibly win? If, instead of winning, you will probably die? Now, does that make sense? I ask you, Mr. Wolfe—you are a wise and clever and able man—what would you do if you were in my husband's position?"

Wolfe muttered, "You put that as a question?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well. Granting that you have described the situation correctly, I would kill Mr. Blaney."

She looked startled. "But that's silly." She frowned. "Of course you're joking, and it's no joke."

"I'd kill him in a second," Eugene told Wolfe, "if I thought I could get away with it. I suppose *you* could, but I couldn't."

"And I'm afraid," Wolfe said politely, "you couldn't hire me for that." He glanced at the clock. "I

would advise against your consulting even your wife. An undetected murder is strictly a one-man job. Her advice, sir, is sound. Are you going to take it?"

"No." Eugene sounded as stubborn as she said he was.

"Are you going to kill Mr. Blaney?"

"No."

"Do you still want to pay me five thousand dollars?"

"Yes, I do."

Mrs. Poor, who was rapidly becoming Martha to me, tried to horn in, but bigger and louder people than her had failed at that when orchid time was at hand. Wolfe ignored her and went on to Mr. Poor:

"I advise you against that, too, under the circumstances. Here are the circumstances—Archie, take your notebook. Make a receipt reading, 'Received from Eugene R. Poor five thousand dollars, in return for which I agree, in case he dies within one year, to give the police the information he has given me today, and to take any further action that may seem to me advisable.' Sign my name and initial it as usual. Get all details from Mr. Poor." Wolfe pushed back his chair and got the levers of his muscles in position to hoist the bulk.

Eugene's eyes were moist with tears, but they came, not from emotion, but from smoke from his second cigar. In fact, throughout the interview his nervousness seemed

to concentrate on his cigar. He had dropped it twice, and the smoke seemed determined to go down the wrong way and make him cough. But he was able to speak, all right.

"That's no good," he objected. "You don't even say what kind of action. At least, you ought to say —"

"I advised you against it under the circumstances." Wolfe was on his feet. "Those, sir, are the circumstances. That's all I'll undertake. Suit yourself." He started to move.

But Eugene had another round to fire. His hand went in a pocket and came out full of folded money. "I hadn't mentioned," he said, displaying the pretty objects, "that I brought it in cash. Speaking of income tax, if you're up to the ninety per cent bracket, getting it in cash would make it a lot more—"

Wolfe's look stopped him. "Pfui," Wolfe said. He hadn't had as good a chance to show off for a month. "I am not a common cheat, Mr. Poor. Not that I am a saint. Given adequate provocation, I might conceivably cheat a man—or a woman, or even a child. But you are suggesting that I cheat, not a man or woman or child, but a hundred and forty million of my fellow citizens. Bah."

We stared at his back as he left, as he knew we would, and in a moment we heard the sound of his elevator door opening.

I flipped to a fresh page in my

notebook and turned to Eugene and Martha. "To refresh your memory," I said, "the name is Archie Goodwin. Among other things, I'm Wolfe's assistant, and I'm the one that has been doing the work around here for fifty years, more or less. I am also, Mr. Poor, an admirer of your wife."

He nearly dropped his cigar again. "You're what?"

"I admire your wife as an advice giver. She has learned one of the most important rules—that, far as life falls short of perfection, it is more fun outside the grave than in it. With over two hundred thousand bucks—"

"I've had enough advice," he said as if he meant it. "My mind is made up."

"Okay." I got the notebook in position. "Give me everything you think we'll need. First, basic facts. Home and business addresses?"

It took close to an hour, so it was nearly five o'clock when they left. I found Eugene irritating and therefore kept my prejudice intact. I wondered later what difference it would have made in my attitude if I had known that in a few hours he would be dead. Even if you take the line that he had it coming to him, which would be easy to justify, at least it would have made the situation more interesting. But during that hour, as far as I knew, they were just a couple of white-livers, scared stiff by a false alarm named Blaney; it was merely another job.

I was still typing from my notes when, at six o'clock, after the regulation two hours in the plant-rooms, Wolfe came down to the office. He got fixed in his chair, rang for Fritz to bring beer, and demanded, "Did you take that man's money?"

I grinned at him. Up to his old tricks. I had been a civilian again for only a week, and here he was, already treating me like a hireling, just as he had for years, acting as if I had never been a colonel, as, in fact, I hadn't, but anyway I had been a major.

I asked him, "What do you think? If I say I took it you'll claim that your attitude as you left plainly indicated that he had insulted you and you wouldn't play. If I say I refused it you'll claim I've done you out of a fee. Which do you prefer?"

He abandoned it. "Do your typing. I like to hear you typing. If you are typing you can't talk."

To humor him I typed, which as it turned out was just as well, since that neat list of facts was going to be needed before bedtime. It was finished when Fritz entered at eight o'clock to announce dinner.

Back in the office, where the clock said 9:42, I was just announcing my intention of catching a movie by the tail at the Rialto, when the phone rang. It was our old friend, Inspector Cramer, whose voice I hadn't heard for weeks, asking for Wolfe. Wolfe

picked up his receiver, and I stuck to mine so as to get it firsthand.

"Wolfe? . . . Cramer. I've got a paper here, taken from the pocket of a dead man, a receipt for five thousand dollars, signed by you, dated today. It says you have information to give the police if he dies. All right, he's dead. I don't ask you to come up here, because I know you wouldn't, and I'm too busy to go down there. What's the information?"

Wolfe grunted. "What killed him?"

"An explosion. Just give—"

"Did it kill his wife too?"

"Naw, she's okay, only overcome, you know. Just give—"

"I haven't got the information. Mr. Goodwin has it. Archie?"

I spoke up: "It would take quite a while, Inspector, and I've got it all typed. I can run up there—"

"All right; come ahead. The Poor apartment on Eighty-fourth Street. The number is—"

"I know the number. I know everything. Just rest till I get there."

In the living-room of an apartment on the sixth floor, on 84th Street near Amsterdam Avenue, I stood and looked down at what was left of Eugene Poor. All I really recognized was the gray herring-bone suit and the shirt and tie, on account of what the explosion had done to his face, and also on that account I didn't look much, for while I may not be a softy, I see no

point in prolonged staring at a face that has entirely stopped being a face.

I asked Sergeant Purley Stebbins, who was sticking close by me, apparently to see that I didn't swipe Eugene's shoes, "You say a cigar did that to him?"

Purley nodded. "Yeah; so the wife says. He lit a cigar, and it blew up."

"Huh. I don't believe it. . . . Yes, I guess I do, too, if she says so. They make novelties. Now, that's a novelty."

I looked around. The room was full of what you would expect—asorted snoops, all doing the chores, from print collectors up to inspectors, or at least one inspector, namely, Cramer himself, who sat at a table near a wall reading the script. I had brought him. Most of them I knew, at least by sight, but there was one complete stranger. She was in a chair in a far corner, being questioned by a homicide dick named Rowcliff. Being trained to observe details even when under a strain, I had caught at a glance some of her outstanding characteristics, such as youth, shapeliness, and shallow depression at the temples, which happen to appeal to me.

I aimed a thumb in her direction and asked Purley, "Bystander, wife's sister, or what?"

He shook his head. "God knows. She came to call just after we got here, and we want to know what for."

I strolled over to the corner and stopped alongside them, and the girl and the dick looked up. "Excuse me," I told her; "When you get through here will you kindly call on Nero Wolfe at this address?" I handed her a card. The temples were even better close up. "Mr. Wolfe is going to solve this murder."

Rowcliff snarled. He always snarled. "Get away from here, and stay away."

Actually, he was helpless, because the inspector had sent for me, and he knew it. I ignored him and told the temples, "If this person takes that card away from you, it's in the phone book—Nero Wolfe," left them, and crossed over to Cramer at the table, dodging photographers and other scientists on the way.

Cramer didn't look up, so I asked the top of his head, "Where's Mrs. Poor?"

He growled, "Bedroom."

"I want to see her."

"The hell you do." He jiggled the sheets I had brought him. "Sit down."

I sat down and said, "I want to see our client."

"So you've got a client?"

"Sure, we have. Didn't you see that receipt?"

He grunted. "Give her a chance. I am. Let her get herself together. . . . Don't touch that!"

I was only moving a hand to point at a box of cigars there on the

table, with the lid closed. I grinned at him. "The more the merrier. I mean, fingerprints. But if that's the box the loaded one came from, you ought to satisfy my curiosity. He smoked two cigars this afternoon at the office."

Cramer shot me a glance, then got out his penknife and opened the lid and lifted the paper flap. It was a box of 25, and 24 of them were still there. Only one gone. I inspected at close range, sat back, and nodded. "They're the same. They not only look it, but the bands say Alta Vista. There would be two of those bands still in the ashtray down at the office if Fritz wasn't so neat." I squinted again at the array in the box. "They certainly look kosher. Do you suppose they're all loaded?"

"I don't know. The laboratory can answer that one." He closed the box with the tip of his knife. "Damn murders, anyhow." He tapped the papers with his finger. "This is awful pat. The wife let out a hint or two, and I've sent for Blaney. I hope to God it's a wrap-up, and maybe it is. How did Poor seem this afternoon, scared, nervous, what?"

"Mostly stubborn. Mind made up."

"What about the wife?"

"Stubborn too. She wanted him to get out from under and go on breathing. She thought they could be as happy as larks on the income from a measly quarter of a million."

The next twenty minutes was a record—Inspector Cramer and me conversing without a single ugly remark. It lasted that long only because of various interruptions from his army. The last one, toward the end, was from Rowcliff walking up to the table to say, "Do you want to talk to this young woman, Inspector?"

"How do I know? What about her?"

"Her name is Helen Vardis. She's an employee of Poor's firm, Blaney & Poor—been with them four years. At first she showed signs of hysteria and then calmed down. First she said she just happened to come here. Then she saw what that was worth and said she came to see Poor by appointment, at his request, on a confidential matter, and wants us to promise not to tell Blaney, or she would lose her job."

"What confidential matter?"

"She won't say. That's what I've been working on."

"Work on it some more."

There was a commotion at the outer door, and it came on through the foyer into the living-room in the shape of a municipal criminologist gripping the arm of a wild-eyed young man who apparently didn't want to be gripped. They were both talking, or at least making noises. It was hard to tell whether they were being propelled by the young man pulling or the cop pushing.

Cramer boomed, "Doyle! What

the hell? Who is that?"

The young man goggled around, declaiming, "I have a right—Oh! There you are."

She said, as if she didn't need any information from snakes or rats; "You didn't lose any time, did you? Now you think you can have her, don't you?"

He held the stare, showing no reaction except clamping his jaw, and their audience sat tight. In a moment he seemed to realize it was rather a public performance, and his head started to pivot, doing a slow circle, taking in the surroundings. It was a good, thorough job of looking, without any waver or pause, so far as I could see, even when it hit the most sensational item, namely, the corpse. During the process his eyes lost their wild look entirely, and when he spoke his voice was cool and controlled. It was evident that his mental operations were enough in order for him to pick the most intelligent face in the bunch, since it was to me he put the question:

"Are you in charge here?"

I replied, "No. This one. Inspector Cramer."

He strode across and looked Cramer in the eye and made a speech: "My name is Joe Groll. I work for Blaney & Poor, factory foreman. I followed that girl, Helen Vardis, when she left home tonight, because I wanted to know where she was going, and she came here. The police cars and cops going in

and out made me want to ask questions, and finally I got the answer that a man named Poor had been murdered, so I wanted to find out. Where is Blaney? Conroy Blaney, the partner—"

"I know," Cramer said, looking disgusted. Naturally he was disgusted, since what he had hoped would be a wrap-up was spilling out in various directions. "We've sent for Blaney, Groll. Why were you following—?"

"That isn't true!"

More diversions. Helen Vardis had busted out of her corner to join the table group, close enough to Joe Groll to touch him, but they weren't touching. Instead of resuming their staring match, they were both intent on Cramer.

Looking even more disgusted, Cramer asked her, "What isn't true?"

"That he was following me!" Helen was mad clear to her temples and pretty as a picture. "Why should he follow me? He came here to—" She bit it off sharp.

"Yeah," Cramer said encouragingly. "To what?"

"I don't know! But I do know who killed Mr. Poor! It was Martha Davis!"

"That helps. Who is Martha Davis?"

Joe Groll said, giving information again, "She means Mrs. Poor. That was her name when she worked in the factory, before she got married. She means Mrs. Poor

killed her husband. That's on account of jealousy. She's crazy."

A quiet but energetic voice came from a new direction: "She certainly is."

It was Martha, who emerged from a door at the far end and approached the table. She was pale and didn't seem any too sure of her leg action, but she made her objective all right. She spoke to the girl, with no sign of violent emotion that I could detect, not even resentment: "Helen, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. I think you will be when you have calmed down and thought things over. You have no right or reason to talk like that. You accuse me of killing my husband? Why?"

Very likely Helen would have proceeded to tell her why, but at that moment a cop entered from the foyer escorting a stranger. Cramer motioned for them to back out.

But the stranger was not a backer-out. He came on straight to the table and, since the arrangement showed plainly that Cramer was it, addressed the inspector: "I'm Conroy. Where's Gene Poor?"

Not that he was aggressive or in any way overwhelming. His voice was a tenor squeak and it fitted his looks. I could have picked him up and set him down again without grunting. He had an undersized nose and not much chin, and he was going bald. In spite of all those handicaps his sudden appearance

had a remarkable effect. Martha Poor simply turned and left the room. The expressions on the faces of Helen Vardis and Joe Groll changed completely; they went deadpan in one second flat. I saw at once that there would be no more blurring.

As for Blaney, he looked around, saw the body of his partner on the floor, stepped toward it and gazed down at it, and squeaked, "Good heavens! Good heavens! Who did it?" . . .

Next morning at eleven o'clock, when Wolfe came down to the office after his two-hour session up in the plant-rooms, I made my report. He took it, as usual, leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed, with no visible sign of consciousness. The final chapter was the details given me by Martha Poor, with whom I had managed to have a talk around midnight by pressing Cramer on the client angle and wearing him down. I gave it to Wolfe:

"They came here yesterday in their own car. When they left here, a little before five, they drove to Madison Square Garden and got a program of the afternoon rodeo performance, the reason for that being he had needed to explain his absence from the office and, not wanting Blaney to know that he was coming to see you, he had said he was going to the rodeo, and wanted to be able to answer questions if he

was asked about it. Then they drove up to Westchester. Conroy Blaney has a place up there, a shack in the hills where he lives and spends his evenings and weekends thinking up novelties, and they had a date to see him there and discuss things.

"Mrs. Poor had persuaded Poor to go, thinking they might reach an agreement, but Poor hadn't wanted to, and on the way up he balked, so they stopped at a place near Scarsdale, Monty's Tavern, to debate. Poor won the debate. He wouldn't go. She left him at the tavern and went on to Blaney's place alone. The date was for six-fifteen and she got there right on the dot. . . . Are you awake?"

He grunted.

I went on: "Blaney wasn't there. He lives alone, and the doors were locked. She waited around and got cold. At ten minutes to seven she beat it back to the tavern. She and Poor ate dinner there, then drove back to town, put the car in the garage, and went home. Poor had had no cigar after dinner because they hadn't had his brand at the tavern and he wouldn't smoke anything else. He has been smoking Alta Vistas for years, ten to fifteen a day. So he hung up his hat and opened a fresh box. She didn't see him do it because she was in the bathroom. She heard the sound of the explosion—not very loud—and ran out, and there he was. She phoned downstairs, and the eleva-

tor man and hall man came and phoned for a doctor and the police. . . . Are you still awake?"

He grunted again.

"Okay. That's it. When I returned to the living-room everyone had left, including Poor's leftovers. Some friend had come to spend the night, and of course there was a cop out in the hall. When I got home you were in bed snoring."

He had long ago quit bothering to deny that he snored. Now he didn't bother about anything, but just sat there. I resumed with the plant records. Noon came and went, and still he was making no visible effort to earn five thousand dollars, or even five hundred. Finally he heaved a sigh, almost opened his eyes, and told me, "You say the face was unrecognizable."

"Yes, sir. As I described it."

"From something concealed in a cigar. Next to incredible. Phone Mr. Cramer. Tell him it is important that the identity of the corpse be established beyond question. Also, I want to see a photograph of Mr. Poor while still intact."

I goggled at him. "For God's sake, what do you think? That she doesn't know her own husband? She came home with him. Now, really. The old insurance gag? Your mind's in a rut. I will not phone Mr. Cramer merely to put myself on the receiving end of a horse laugh."

"Be quiet. Let me alone. Phone Mr. Cramer."

At lunch he discussed Yugoslav politics. That was all right, because he never talked business at the table, but when, back in the office, he went through the elaborate operations of getting himself settled with the atlas, I decided to apply spurs and sink them deep.

I arose and confronted him and announced, "I resign."

He muttered testily without looking up, "Nonsense. Do your work."

"No, sir. I'm going upstairs to pack. If you're too lazy to wiggle a finger, very well, that's not news. But you could at least send me to the Public Library to look up the genealogy of—"

"Confound it!" He glared at me. "I engaged to give that information to the police, and have done so. Also to take any further action that might seem to me advisable. I have done that."

"Do you mean you're through with the case?"

"Certainly not. I haven't even started, because there's nothing to start on. Mr. Cramer may do the job himself, or he may not. I hope he does. If you don't want to work, go to a movie."

I went upstairs to my room and tried to read a book, knowing it wouldn't work, because I can never settle down when a murder case is on. So I returned to the office and rattled papers, but even that didn't faze him. At four o'clock, when he went up to the plant-rooms, I went

to the corner and got afternoon papers, but there was nothing in them but the usual stuff.

When he came down again at six it was more of the same, and I went out for a walk to keep from throwing a chair at him, and stayed until dinnertime. After dinner I went to a movie, and when I got home, a little after eleven, and found him sitting drinking beer and reading a magazine, I went upstairs without saying good night.

Next morning, Thursday, there wasn't a peep out of him before nine o'clock, the time he went up to the damn' orchids.

I read the papers and had more coffee.

When Wolfe came down to the office at eleven I greeted him with a friendly suggestion.

"Look," I said; "you're an expert on murder. But this Poor murder bores you because you've already collected your fee. So how about this?"

I spread the morning *Gazette* on his desk and indicated. "Absolutely Grade A. Man's naked body found in an old orchard off a lonely lane four miles from White Plains, head crushed to a pancake, apparently by a car running square over him. It offers many advantages to a great detective like you. It might be Hitler, since his body has never been found. It is in a convenient neighborhood, easily reached by train, or auto, electric lights and city gas.

The man has been dead at least thirty-six hours, counting from now, so it has the antique quality you like, with the clues all—"

In another minute I would have had him sputtering with fury, but the doorbell rang. "Study it," I told him, and went to the hall and the front and, following routine, fingered the curtain edge aside for a look through the glass panel.

After one brief glance I went back to the office and told Wolfe casually, "It's only Cramer. To hell with him. Since he's working on the Poor case and you're not interested—"

"Archie. Confound you. Bring him in."

The bell was ringing again, and that irritates me, so I went and got him. He was wearing his raincoat and his determined look. I relieved him of the former in the hall and let him take the latter on into the office.

When I joined them, Cramer was lowering himself into the red leather chair and telling Wolfe, "I dropped in on my way uptown because I thought it was only fair, since you gave me that information. I think I'm going to arrest your client on a charge of murder."

I sat down and felt at home.

Wolfe grunted. He leaned back in his chair, got his fingertips touching in the locality of his midriff, and said offensively, "Nonsense. You can't arrest my client on any charge whatever. My client is

dead. By the way, is he? Has the corpse been properly identified?"

Cramer nodded. "Certainly. With a face like that it's routine. Barber, dentist, and doctor—they're the experts. Why, what did you think it was, an insurance fake?"

"I didn't think. Then you can't arrest my client."

"Goodwin says Mrs. Poor is your client."

"Mr. Goodwin is impulsive. You read that receipt. So you're going to charge Mrs. Poor?"

"I think I am."

"Indeed."

Cramer scowled at him. "Don't 'indeed' me. Damn it, didn't I take the trouble to stop and tell you about it?"

"Go ahead and tell me."

"Very well." Cramer screwed up his lips, deciding where to start. "First, I'd appreciate an answer to a question. What is this identity angle, anyhow? There's not the slightest doubt it was Poor. Not only the corpse itself—other things, like the elevator man who took them up when they came home, and the people up at the tavern where they ate dinner. He was known there. And what did you want a photograph for?"

"Did you bring one?"

"No. Apparently there aren't any. I wasn't interested after the dentist and barber verified the corpse, but I understand the papers had to settle for sketches drawn from descriptions. One reason I

came here, what's your idea doubting the identity of the corpse?"

Wolfe shook his head. "Evidently silly, since you're ready to take Mrs. Poor. You were telling me—"

"Yeah. Of course, Goodwin told you about the box of cigars."

"Something."

"Well, that was it, all right. Poor smoked about a box every two days, boxes of twenty-five. He bought them ten boxes at a time, from a place on Varick Street near his office and factory. There were four unopened boxes in his apartment and they're okay. The one he started on when he got home Tuesday night—the twenty-four left in it are all loaded. Any one of them would have killed him two seconds after he lit it."

Wolfe muttered, "That's hard to believe—inside a cigar—"

"Right. I thought so, too. The firm of Blaney & Poor has been making trick cigars for years, but they're harmless; all they do is *phut*, and make you jump. What's in these twenty-four is anything but harmless—a special kind of instantaneous fuse the size of an ordinary thread, and a very special explosive capsule that was invented during the war and is still on the secret list. Even this is confidential; it's made by the Becker Products Corporation, and their men and the FBI are raising hell trying to find out how this murderer got hold of them. That's not for publication."

"I'm not a publisher."

"Okay."

"Of course," Wolfe remarked, "the Alta Vista people deny all knowledge."

"Sure. We let them analyze five of the twenty-four, after removing the fuses and capsules, and they say the fillers are theirs but the wrappers are not. They say whoever sliced them open and inserted the things and re-wrapped them was an expert, and anyhow anybody could see that."

"Now, then. There are six people connected with Blaney & Poor who are good at making trick cigars. Four of them are mixed up in this. Helen Vardis is one of their most highly skilled workers. Joe Groll is the foreman and can do anything. Blaney is the best of all; he shows them how. And Mrs. Poor worked there for four years when she was Martha Davis, up to two years ago, when she married Poor."

Wolfe shuddered. "Six people good at making trick cigars. Couldn't the murder have been a joint enterprise? Couldn't you convict all of them?"

"I don't appreciate jokes about murder," Cramer said morosely. "I wish I could. It's a defect of character. As for getting the loaded cigars into Poor's apartment, that also is wide open. He always had them delivered to his office, and the package would lie around there, sometimes as long as two or three days, until he took it home. So anybody

might have substituted the loaded box. . . . But now, about Mrs. Poor. How do you like this? Naturally we gave the cigars and the box everything we had. It was a very neat job. But underneath the cigars we found two human hairs, one five inches long and one six and a half inches. We have compared them with hairs taken from various heads. Those two came from the head of Mrs. Poor. Unquestionably. So I think I'll charge her."

Wolfe's eyes half closed. "I wouldn't do it if I were you, Mr. Cramer."

"Oh." He glared at Wolfe. "You wouldn't."

"No, sir. Let me put it this way." Wolfe maneuvered himself into position for an uplift, and got to his feet. "You have her on trial. The hairs have been placed in evidence. I am the defense attorney. I am speaking to the jury."

Wolfe fixed his eyes on me. "Ladies and gentlemen, I respect your intelligence. The operation of turning those cigars into deadly bombs has been described to you as one requiring the highest degree of skill and the minutest attention. Deft fingers and perfect eyesight were essential. Since the slightest irregularity about the appearance of that box of cigars might have attracted the attention of a veteran smoker, you can imagine the anxious scrutiny with which each cigar was inspected as it was arranged

in the box. And you can realize how incredible it is that such a person, so intently engaged on anything and everything the eye could see, could possibly have been guilty of such atrocious carelessness as to leave two of the hairs of her head in that box with those cigars. Ladies and gentlemen, I appeal to your intelligence! I put it to you that those hairs, far from being evidence that Martha Poor killed her husband, are, instead, evidence that Martha Poor did not kill her husband!"

Wolfe sat down and muttered, "Then they acquit her, and whom do you charge next?"

Cramer growled, "So she is your client, after all."

"No, sir, she is not. It was Mr. Poor who paid me. You said you came here because you wanted to be fair. *Pfui*. You came here because you had misgivings. You had them because you are not a ninny. A jury would want to know, anyone concerned would want to know, if those hairs did not get in the box through Mrs. Poor's carelessness, how did they get there? Who has had access to Mrs. Poor's head or hairbrush? Manifestly, that is a forlorn hope. The best chance, I would say, is the explosive capsules. Discover the tiniest link between anyone of the Becker Products Corporation and one of your suspects, and you have it—if not your case, at least your certainty. On that I couldn't help, since I am no longer connected

with the War Department. You can't convict anybody at all, let alone Mrs. Poor, without an explanation of how he got the capsules. By the way, what about motive? Mrs. Poor was tired of smelling the smoke from her husband's cigars, perhaps?"

"No. Poor was a tightwad and she wanted money. She gets the whole works plus a hundred thousand insurance. Or, according to that girl, Helen Vardis, she wanted Joe Groll, and now they'll get married."

"Proof?"

"Oh, talk." Cramer looked frustrated. "It goes away back to when Mrs. Poor was working there."

Wolfe frowned. "Another thing, Mr. Cramer, about a jury. As you know, I am strongly disinclined to leave this house for any purpose whatever. I detest the idea of leaving it to go to a courtroom and sit for hours on those wooden abominations they think are seats, and the thing they provide for witnesses is even worse. I would strain a point to avoid that experience; but if it can't be avoided, Mr. Goodwin and I shall have to testify that Mr. Poor sat in that chair and told us of his conviction that Mr. Blaney was going to kill him. You know juries; you know how that would affect them. Suppose again that I am the defense attorney and—"

"Heaven help us," I thought, "he's going to address the jury again."

But I got a break in the form of an excuse to skip it when the doorbell rang. Winking at Cramer as I passed him on my way to the hall, I proceeded to the front door and took a peek. I opened the door just enough to slip through out to the stoop, shut the door behind me, and said, "Hello, let's have a little conference."

Conroy Blaney squeaked at me, "What's the idea?"

I grinned at him amiably. "A policeman named Cramer is in Mr. Wolfe's office having a talk, and I thought maybe you had had enough of him for a while. Unless you're tailing him?"

"Inspector Cramer?"

"Yes," I said. "Are you tailing him?"

"Good heavens, no. I want to see Nero Wolfe."

"Okay; then follow me. After we are inside don't talk. Get it?"

"I want to see Nero Wolfe immediately."

"Will you follow instructions or won't you? Do you also want to see Cramer?"

"Very well, open the door."

As I inserted my key I was telling myself, murder or not, I am going to be wishing this specimen was big enough to plug in the jaw before this is finished. He did, however, obey orders. I conducted him into the front room, the door connecting it with the office being closed, left him there on a chair, and went back by way of the hall.

"It can wait," I told Wolfe. "The man from Plehn's with the Den-drobiums."

But a minute later Cramer was standing up to go. Knowing how suspicious he was, as well as how many good reasons he had had for being suspicious on those premises, and also knowing how cops in general love to open doors that don't belong to them just to stick a head in, I escorted him to the front and let him out, then returned to the office and told Wolfe who the company was.

Wolfe frowned. "What does he want?"

"I think he wants to confess. I warn you, his squeak will get on your nerves."

"Bring him in."

I expected to enjoy it, and I did, only it didn't last long. Blaney started off by rejecting the red leather chair and choosing one of the spares, which irritated both of us, since we like our routine. Perched on it, he began, "I was thinking, on my way here, fate has thrown us together, Wolfe. You dominate your field and I dominate mine. We were bound to meet."

It caught Wolfe so completely off balance that he only muttered sarcastically, "Good heavens!"

Blaney nodded with satisfaction. "I knew we would have many things in common. That's my favorite expression, I use it all the time—Good heavens. But you probably want to know where I stand. I

would if I were you. I did not come here because of any fear on my own account. There is not the remotest chance of my safety being endangered. But Tuesday evening up at Gene's apartment I heard a man saying to another man—I presume they were detectives—something about Mrs. Poor being Nero Wolfe's client, and in that case Mrs. Poor was as good as out of it, and Nero Wolfe had decided on Blaney, and, if so, Blaney might as well get his leg shaved for the electrode.

"I knew that might be just talk, but I really think it would be a shame for you to make yourself ridiculous, and I don't think you want to. I'm willing to take this trouble. You're not a man to reach a conclusion without reasons. That wouldn't be scientific, and you and I are both scientists. Tell me your reasons, one by one, and I'll prove they're no good. Go ahead."

"Archie." Wolfe looked at me. "Get him out of here."

There wasn't the slightest indication from Blaney that anyone had said anything except him, and I was too fascinated to move.

Blaney went on: "The truth is, you have no reasons. The fact that Gene was afraid I would kill him proves nothing. He was a born coward. I did describe to him some of the methods by which I could kill a man without detection, but that was merely to impress upon him the fact that he continued to

own half of the business by my sufferance, and therefore my offer of twenty thousand dollars for his half was an act of generosity. I wouldn't condescend to kill a man. No man is worth that much to me, or that little."

He had performed a miracle. I saw it with my own eyes—Nero Wolfe fleeing in haste from his own office. He had chased many a fellow being from that room, but that was the first time he had ever, himself, been chased. It became evident that he wasn't even going to risk staying on that floor when the sound was heard of the door of his elevator banging open and shut.

I told Blaney, "Overlook it. He's eccentric."

Blaney said, "So am I."

I nodded. "Geniuses are."

Blaney was frowning. "Does he really think I killed Gene Poor?"

"Yeah. He does now."

"Why now?"

I waved it away. "Forget it. I'm eccentric, too."

The house phone buzzed, and I swung my chair around and took it. It was Wolfe, on his room extension:

"Archie. Is that man gone?"

"No, sir."

"Get him out of there at once. Phone Saul and tell him to come here as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

The line went dead. So he had actually been stirred up enough to blow some dough on the case. Saul

Panzer, being merely the best all-round investigator west of Nantucket, not counting me, came to twenty bucks a day plus expenses.

To get Blaney out I nearly had to carry him. . . .

As luck would have it, Saul Panzer was not to be had at the moment. Since he was free-lancing, you never knew. I finally got it that he was out on Long Island on a job, and left word for him to call. He did so around three, and said he would be able to get to the office soon after six o'clock.

It became obvious that to Wolfe, who had been stirred up, money was no object, since he blew another \$1.80 on a phone call to Washington. I got it through without any trouble to General Carpenter, head of G2, under whom I had been a major and for whom Wolfe had helped to solve certain problems connected with the war. The favor he asked of Carpenter, and of course got, was a telegram that would open doors at the premises of the Becker Products Corporation.

Not satisfied with that, he opened another valve. At ten minutes to four he said to me, "Archie. Find out whether it seems advisable for me to talk with that man, Joe Groll."

"Yes, sir. Tea leaves? Or there's a palmist over on Seventh—"

"See him and find out."

So after he went up to the plant-

rooms I phoned the office of Blaney & Poor and got Joe Groll. No persuasion was required. His tone implied that he would be glad to talk with anybody any time anywhere, after business hours. He would be free at five-thirty. I told him to meet me at Pete's Bar & Grill on 19th Street.

In addition to good whisky, Pete's has booths partitioned to the ceiling, which furnishes privacy. Seated in one of them I was surprised to realize that you could make out a case for calling Joe Groll handsome. They had overdone it a little on the ears, but on the whole he was at least up to grade if not fancy.

After we got our drinks I remarked casually, "As I told you on the phone, I want to discuss this murder. You may have heard of Nero Wolfe. Poor and his wife came to see him Tuesday afternoon, to tell him Blaney was going to dissolve the partnership by killing Poor."

He nodded. "Yes, I know."

"Oh. The cops told you?"

"No, Martha told me yesterday. Mrs. Poor. She asked me to come up and help about things—the funeral." He made a gesture. "Gosh, one lousy civilian funeral makes more fuss than a thousand dead men over there did."

I nodded. "Sure; the retail business always has more headaches than the wholesale." I sipped my highball. "I don't go for this theory

that it was Helen Vardis that killed Poor. Do you?"

"What?" He stared. "What are you talking about What theory?" His fingers had tightened around his glass.

"Why, this idea that Helen Vardis would do anything for Blaney, God knows why, and she made the cigars for him, and she went there Tuesday night—"

"Well, for Pete's sake." He said that calmly, and then suddenly his voice went up high: "Who thought that one up? Was it that cop Rowcliff? That buzzard? Was it Nero Wolfe? Was it you?"

He sounded next door to hysterical. I sure had pushed the wrong button, or maybe the right one, but I didn't want him sore at me. "It wasn't me," I assured him. "Don't get excited."

He laughed. It sounded bitter but not hysterical. "That's right," he said, "I must remember that—not to get excited. Everybody is very thoughtful. They put you in uniform and teach you what every young man ought to know, and take you across the ocean in the middle of hell, bombs, bullets, shells, flame-throwers; your friends die right against you and bleed down your neck; and after two years of that they bring you home and turn you loose and tell you, now, remember, don't get excited."

He drank his highball, clear to the bottom, and put his glass down.

"I'm all right," he said calmly. "So I am loose again and come back to my job. Don't get excited. Here's what I find. A girl I had been sort of counting on, named Martha Davis, has married the boss, and no one told me. It wasn't her fault, she never promised me anything, not even to write to me; but I had been looking forward to seeing her. Oh, I saw her, because she was in trouble and asked me to help. She thought her husband was going to get killed, and knowing Blaney as I did, I saw no reason to doubt it. I met her places a few times because she wanted to talk it over with me, and she wanted me to watch Blaney. Why am I spilling to you? You weren't in the Army."

"I was in the Army," I said, "but I admit nobody bled down my neck. I did what I was told."

"So did I, brother. Didn't we all? Anyhow, I wasn't heartbroken, because she seemed a little older than I had remembered her, and, besides, there was another girl who had been nothing but a kid in the factory, but she had grown up. I'm not telling you anything the cops don't know. Gosh, the cops are something! That's Helen Vardis. You saw her the other night."

"Yeah, she seemed upset."

"Upset?" He laughed a one-second laugh. "Sure, she was upset. I fell for her like a Sherman tank roaring down a cliff. I certainly hit bottom. . . . All right, I guess I will. Thanks."

That was for the second drink. He picked it up, drank half.

"It is good whisky. . . . She seemed to reciprocate. I guess I was a little leery of all civilians, even her, but she seemed to reciprocate. I can't understand what that guy Poor had that attracted girls, and at his age, too. That I will never understand. First Martha, and then her. I saw her with him in a restaurant. Then I saw them together in his car. Then I followed her from the office and watched her meet him in Fourteenth Street, and they took a taxi and I lost them. Naturally, I sprung it on her, and she the same as told me to go to hell. She refused to explain."

He finished the drink. "So they say don't get excited. The cops told me yesterday and again today, don't get excited. Which one is it that thinks Helen Vardis was helping Blaney? Is it you?"

I shook my head. "I'm not a cop. It's just something I heard and I wondered what you thought of it. In a murder case you're apt to hear anything."

"Why do you listen?"

"Why not? I'm listening to you."

He laughed, somewhat better. "You're a hell of a guy to work on a murder. You don't try to hammer me and you don't try to uncle. Do you want to come along and help me do something?"

"I might if you'd describe it."

"Wait a minute. I want to make a phone call."

He slid along the seat and left the booth. I sipped my highball and lit a cigarette, wondering whether the feel of blood going down his neck had really loosed a screw in him or if he was just temporarily rattled.

In less than five minutes he was back, sliding along the seat again, and announcing, "Blaney's up at his place in Westchester. I phoned to ask him about a job we're doing, but really to find out if he was up there."

"Good. Now we know. Is that where we're going?"

"No." He gazed at his glass. "I thought I drank that—Oh. You had it filled again. Thanks." He took some. "Anyway, that idea about Helen is silly, because it was obviously either Martha or Blaney, if the cops have any brains at all. Martha says she went to Blaney's place in Westchester at six-fifteen Tuesday to keep a date she and Poor had with him, and there was no one there and she waited around until ten minutes to seven. Blaney says he was there all the time, from a quarter to six on, all evening, until he got the phone call from the police that Poor had been killed. So one of them is lying, and the one that's lying is obviously the one that killed Poor. So it's Blaney."

"Why—because Martha wouldn't lie?"

He frowned at me. "Now, don't smart up. What the hell would she kill him for? She only got him two

years ago and he had everything he ever had. Anyway, it was Blaney, and I am fed up with all the gear-grinding, and he is now through with me and I'll be out of a job, so to hell with him. I'm going to see what I can find. On account of the trick cigars the cops wanted to go through the office and factory, and Blaney told them sure, go ahead as far as you like, but he didn't tell them about the abditories, and they didn't find them."

"How do you spell it?"

He spelled it: "Abditory. Place to hide things. Blaney says it's a scientific term. The office is full of them. I haven't had a chance before now since Tuesday night, but with him up in Westchester I'm going to take a look. With a nut like Blaney you never can tell. Want to come along?"

"Have you got keys?"

"Keys? I'm the foreman."

"Okay, finish your drink."

He did so, and I got the bill and paid it, and we got our hats and coats and emerged.

When we were on the sidewalk alongside my car I asked him to wait a minute, marched back to where a taxi was parked, jerked the door open, and stuck my head in, and said, "There's no sense in this, Helen. Come on and ride with us."

"Lookit, mister—" the taxi driver began, like a menace. "You'd better get out!"

"Everybody relax," I said pleas-

antly. "I can't get out because I'm not in; I'm only looking in." I told the temples, "This is absolutely childish. You don't know the first principles of tailing, and this driver you happened to get is, if anything, worse. If you insist on tailing Joe, okay; we'll put him in the cab and let them go ahead, and you ride with me and I'll show you how it's done."

"Yeah?" the menace croaked. "Show her how what's done?"

"See that," I told her. "See the kind of mind he's got."

"You're smart as they come, aren't you?"

"That," I said, "you will learn more about as time goes on. I'm at least smarter than you are if you let that meter continue to tick. Pay him and come on."

She moved, so I stood aside and held the door while she got out. On the sidewalk she faced me and said, "You seem to be in charge of everything, so you pay him."

It was an unpleasant surprise; but I didn't hesitate—first, because I liked the way she was handling herself, and, second, because all expenses would come out of the five grand anyway. So I parted with two bucks, took her elbow and steered her to the sedan, opened the front door and told Joe Groll, "Move over a little. There's room for three."

He did so and I got in and slammed the door. By the time I had got the engine started and

rolled to the corner and turned downtown, neither of them had said a word.

"If I were you folks," I told them, "I would incorporate and call it the Greater New York Mutual Tailing League. I don't see how you keep track of who is following whom on any given day. Of course, if one of you gets convicted of murder that will put a stop to it. You have now, however, the one good reason that I know of for getting married, the fact that a wife can't testify against a husband or vice versa."

I swerved around a pushcart. "The idea is, Helen, we are bound for the Blaney & Poor office to go through the abditories. We think he hid something in them."

"What?" she demanded.

"We don't know. Maybe a detailed estimate in triplicate of what it would cost to kill Poor. Maybe a blueprint of the cigar. Even a rough sketch would help."

"That's ridiculous. You sound to me like a clown."

"Good. It is a well-known fact that clowns have the biggest and warmest hearts on record except mothers and three characters in books by Dickens."

I pulled over to the curb in front of Blaney & Poor's on Varick Street.

That office was no place for a stranger to poke around in. It was on the first floor of a dingy old building in the middle of the block, with part of the factory, so Joe said,

in the rear, and the rest on the second floor. As soon as we were inside and had the lights turned on, Helen sat in a chair at a desk and looked disdainful, but as the search went on I noticed she kept her eyes open.

Joe tossed his hat and coat on a chair, got a screwdriver from a drawer, went to the typewriter on the desk Helen was sitting at, used the screwdriver, lifted out the typewriter roller, unscrewed an end of it and turned it vertical, and about four dozen dice rolled out. He held the open end of the roller so the light would hit it right, peered in, put the dice back in and screwed the end on, and put the roller back on the machine.

His fingers were as swift and accurate as any I had ever seen. Even if I had known about it, I would have needed at least ten minutes for the operation; he took about three.

"Trick dice?" I asked him.

"They're just a stock item," he said, and went over to a door in the rear wall, opened it, took it off its hinges, leaned it against a desk, knelt on the floor, removed a strip from the bottom edge of the door; and out came about ten dozen lead pencils.

"Trick pencils?"

"When you press, perfume comes out," he said, and stretched out flat to look into the abditory.

Joe continued his tour of the abditories, which were practically everywhere, in desk lamps, chair legs,

water cooler, ashtrays, even one in the metal base of a desk calendar that was on a big desk in the corner.

It was while he had that one open, jiggling things out of it, that I heard him mutter, "This is a new one on me." He walked over and put something on the desk in front of Helen and asked her, "What is that thing, do you know?"

She picked it up, inspected it, and shook her head. "Haven't the faintest idea."

"Let me see." I got up and went over, and Helen handed it to me. The second I saw it I stopped being casual inside, but I tried to keep the outside as before. It was a long, thin metal capsule, about three-quarters of an inch long and not over an eighth of an inch in diameter, smooth all over, with no seam or opening, except at one end, where a thread came through, a dark-brown, medium-sized thread as long as my index finger. I grunted. "Where did you find it?"

"You saw me find it." Joe sounded either irritated or something else. "In that calendar on Blaney's desk."

"Oh, that's Blaney's desk? How many, just this one?"

"No, several." Joe went to Blaney's desk and then came back to us. "Three more. Four altogether."

I took them from him and compared. They were all the same. I regarded Helen's attractive face. She looked interested. I regarded Joe's

handsome face if you didn't count the ears. He looked more interested.

"I think," I said, "that it was one of these things that was in the cigar that Poor never smoked. What do you think?"

Joe said, "I think we can damn soon find out. Give me one." He had a gleam in his eye.

I shook my head. "The idea doesn't appeal to me." I looked at my wrist. "Quarter to nine. Mr. Wolfe is in the middle of dinner. The proper thing is for you to take these objects to the police, but they're likely to feel hurt because you didn't tell them about the abdications when they were here. We can't interrupt Mr. Wolfe's dinner, even with a phone call, so I suggest that I buy you a meal somewhere, modest but nutritious, and then we all three go and deliver these gadgets, calendar included, to him."

"You take them to him," Joe said. "I think I'll go home."

"I think I'll go home, too," Helen said.

"No. Nothing doing. You'll just follow each other, and get all confused again. If I take these things to Wolfe without taking you he'll fly into a temper and phone the police to go get you. Not to flatter myself, wouldn't you prefer to come with me?"

Helen said in the nastiest possible tone, "I don't have to eat at the same table with him."

Joe said, trying to match her tone

but failing because he wasn't a female, "If you did I wouldn't eat."

Which was all a lot of organic fertilizer. I took them to Gallagher's, where they not only ate at the same table, but devoured hunks of steak served from the same platter. It was a little after ten when we got to Nero Wolfe's place on 35th Street.

Wolfe was seated behind his desk, with the evening beer—one empty bottle and two full ones—on a tray in front of him. Joe Groll, in the red leather chair, also had a bottle and glass, on the check-writing table beside him. Helen Vardis would have made a good cheesecake shot over by the big globe in the upholstered number that Wolfe, himself, sometimes used. I was at my desk, as usual, with my oral report all finished, watching Wolfe inspect the workmanship of the removable bottom of the desk calendar.

He put it down, picked up one of the metal capsules with its dangling thread, and gave it another look, put that down too, and turned his half-closed eyes on Joe:

"Mr. Groll."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't know how much sense you have. If you have slightly more than your share, you must realize that if I hand these things to the police with Mr. Goodwin's story, they will conclude that you are a liar. They will ask, why did you wait until witnesses were present to ex-

plore those hiding places? Why did you think they were worth exploring at all? Is it even remotely credible that Mr. Blaney, after preparing that murderous box of cigars, would leave these things there on his desk in a hiding place that a dozen people know about? They will have other questions, but that's enough to show that they will end by concluding that you put the capsules in the calendar yourself. Where did you get them?"

Joe said firmly, "I wouldn't know about how much sense I've got, but it happened exactly the way you've heard it. As for my waiting for witnesses, I didn't. I only waited until I was sure Blaney was out of range, up at his Westchester place, and then Goodwin was there, and I asked him to come along on the spur of the moment. As for its being remotely credible what you said, there's nothing Blaney wouldn't do. He's a maniac. You don't know him, so you don't know that."

Wolfe grunted. "The devil I don't. I do know that. How long have those hiding places been in existence?"

"Some of them for years. Some are more recent."

Wolfe tapped the desk calendar with a finger.

"How long has this calendar been there?"

"Oh—" Joe considered. "Four or five years. It was there before I got in the Army. . . . Look here, Mr.

Wolfe, you seem to forget that when I saw those things tonight I had no idea what they were, and I still haven't. You seem to know they're the same as the loads in those cigars, and if you do, okay, but I don't."

"Neither do I."

"Then what the hell? Maybe they're full of Chanel Number Five or just fresh air."

Wolfe nodded. "I was coming to that. If I show them to Mr. Cramer he'll take them away from me, and also he'll arrest you as a material witness, and I may possibly need you. We'll have to find out for ourselves."

He pushed a button, and in a moment Fritz entered. Wolfe asked him, "Do you remember that metal percolator that someone sent us and we were fools enough to try?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you throw it out?"

"No, sir, it's in the basement."

"Bring it here, please."

Fritz went. Wolfe picked up a capsule and frowned at it and then turned to me: "Archie. Get me a piece of newspaper, the can of household oil, and a piece of string."

Under the circumstances I would have preferred to go out for a walk, but there was a lady present who might need protection, so I did as I was told. When I got back, Fritz was there with the percolator, which was two-quart size, made of thick metal. We three men collected

at Wolfe's desk to watch the preparations, but Helen stayed in her chair.

With my scissors Wolfe cut a strip of newspaper about two by eight inches, dripped oil on it and rubbed it in with his finger, and rolled it tight into a long, thin, oiled wick. Then we held one end of it against the end of the capsule thread, overlapping a little, and Joe Groll, ready with the piece of string, tied them together. Wolfe opened the lid of the percolator.

"No," Joe objected. "That might stop it. Anyhow, we don't want this glass here."

He finished the job with his swift, sure fingers, while Wolfe and Fritz and I watched. Removing the glass cap and the inside contraption from the percolator, he lowered the capsule through the hole, hanging onto the free end of the oiled wick with one hand while with the other he stuffed a scrap of newspaper in the hole just tight enough to keep the wick from slipping on through. Wolfe nodded approvingly and leaned back in his chair. About two inches of the wick protruded.

"Put it on the floor," Wolfe pointed. "Over there."

Joe moved, taking a folder of matches from his pocket, but I intercepted him. "Wait a minute. Gimme." I took the percolator. "The rest of you go in the hall. I'll light it."

Fritz went, and so did Helen,

but Joe merely backed to a corner and Wolfe didn't move from his chair.

I told Wolfe, "I saw Poor's face and you didn't. Go in the hall."

"Nonsense. That little thing?"

"Then I'll put a blanket over it."

"No. I want to see it."

"So do I," Joe said. "What the hell? I'll bet it's a dud."

I shrugged. "I hope Helen has had a course in first aid." I put the percolator on the floor over by the couch, about five paces from Wolfe's desk, lit a match and applied it to the end of the wick, and stood back and watched. An inch of the wick burned in three seconds. "See you at the hospital," I said cheerily, and beat it to the hall, leaving the door open a crack to see through.

It may have been ten seconds, but it seemed like three times that, before the bang came, and it was a man-size bang, followed immediately by another but different kind of bang. Helen grabbed my arm, but not waiting to enjoy that, I swung the door open and stepped through. Joe was still in the corner, looking surprised. Wolfe had twisted around in his chair to gaze at a bruise in the plaster of the wall behind him.

"The percolator lid," he muttered. "It missed me."

"Yeah." I moved across to observe angles and directions. "By about an inch." I stooped to pick up the percolator lid, bent out of

shape. "This would have felt good on your skull."

Fritz and Helen were back in, and Joe came over with the percolator in his hand. "Feel it," he said. "Hot. Look how it's twisted. Some pill, that is. Dynamite or TNT would never do that, not that amount. I wonder what's in it?"

"It's outrageous," Wolfe declared. I looked at him in surprise. Instead of being relaxed and thankful for his escape, he was sitting straight in his chair, which meant he was ready to pop with fury. "That thing nearly hit me in the head. This settles it. Against Mr. Poor there may have been a valid grievance. Against me, none."

"Well, for Pete's sake." I regarded him without approval. "That's illogical. Nobody aimed it at you. Didn't I tell you to go in the hall? However, if it made you mad enough to do a little work, fine. Here's Joe and Helen, you can start on them."

"No." He got to his feet. "I'm going to bed." He bowed to Helen. "Good night, Miss Vardis." He tilted his head a hundredth of an inch at Joe. "Good night, sir. . . . Archie, put these remaining capsules in the safe."

He marched to the door and was gone.

"Quite a guy," Joe remarked. "He didn't bat an eye when that thing went off and the lid flew past his ear."

"Yeah," I growled. "He has fits.

He's having one now. Instead of taking you two apart and turning you inside out, which is what he should have done, he didn't even tell you where to head in. Do you tell the police about tonight or not? I would say, for the present, *not*. . . . Come on. Taxis are hard to find around here, and I've got to put the car away anyhow. I'll drop you somewhere."

We went. When I got back, some time later, I made a little discovery. Opening the safe to follow my custom of checking the cash last thing at night, I found two hundred bucks gone and an entry in the book for that amount in Wolfe's handwriting, which said, "Saul Panzer, advance on expenses."

So, anyhow, Saul was working.

Friday morning, having nothing else to do, I solved the case. I did it with cold logic. Everything fitted perfectly, and all I needed was enough evidence for a jury. Presumably that was what Saul Panzer was getting. I do not intend to put it all down here, the way I worked it out, because, first, it would take three full pages, and, second, I was wrong. Anyway, I had it solved when, a little before nine o'clock, I was summoned to Wolfe's room and given an errand to perform, with detailed instructions. It sent me to 20th Street.

I would have just as soon have dealt with one of the underlings, but Cramer himself was in his of-

fice and said to bring me in. As I sat down, he whirled his chair a quarter turn, folded his arms, and asked conversationally, "What have you two liars got cooked up now?"

I grinned at him. "Why don't you call Wolfe a liar to his face some day? Do it while I'm there." I took two of the capsules, with threads attached, from my vest pocket, and inquired, "Do you need any more of these?"

He picked one of them up and gave it a good look, then the other one; put them in a drawer of his desk, folded his arms again, and looked me in the eye to shrivel me.

"All right," he said quietly. "Go on. They came in the mail, in a package addressed to Wolfe with letters cut out of a magazine."

"No, sir; not at all. Where I spent the night last night I was idly running my fingers through her lovely hair and felt something, and there they were." Cramer was strictly a family man and had stern ideas. Seeing I had him blushing, I went on, "Actually, it was like this."

I told him the whole story.

He had questions, both during the recital and at the end, and I answered what I could. The one I had expected him to put first he saved till the last.

"Well," he said, "for the present we'll assume that I believe you. You know what that amounts to, but we'll assume it. Even so, how are you on figures? How much are two and one?"

"I'm pretty good. Two plus one plus one equals four."

"Yes? Where do you get that second plus one?"

"So you *can* add," I conceded. "Mr. Wolfe thought maybe you couldn't. However, so can we. Four capsules were found. Two are there in your drawer. One, as I told you, was used in a scientific experiment in Wolfe's office and damn' near killed him. He's keeping the other one for the Fourth of July."

"Like hell he is. I want it."

"Try and get it." I stood up.

"Beat it. I'll get it."

I turned, with dignity, and went.

When I got back to Wolfe's, Fritz met me in the hall to tell me there was a woman in the office, and when I entered I found it was Martha Poor.

I sat down at my desk and told her, "Mr. Wolfe will be engaged until eleven o'clock." I glanced at my wrist. "He'll be down in forty minutes."

She nodded. "I know, I'll wait."

She didn't look exactly bedraggled, nor would I say pathetic, but there was certainly nothing of the man-eater about her. She seemed older than she had on Tuesday. Anyone could have told at a glance that she was having trouble, but whether it was bereavement or bankruptcy was indicated neither by her clothes nor by her expression. She made you feel like going up to her, maybe putting your hand on her shoulder or patting her on

the arm, and asking, "Anything I can do?"

I went to the kitchen and asked Fritz if he had told Wolfe who had come to see him, and Fritz said he hadn't, he had left that to me. So I returned to the office, buzzed the plant-rooms, got Wolfe, and told him, "Returned from mission. I gave them to Cramer himself, and he says he'll get the other one. Mrs. Poor is down here waiting to see you."

"Confound that woman. Send her away."

"But she—"

"No. I know what she wants. I studied her. She wants to know what I'm doing to earn that money. Tell her to go home and read that receipt."

The line died. I swung my chair around and told Martha, "Mr. Wolfe says for you to go home and read the receipt."

She stared. "What?"

"He thinks you came to complain because he isn't earning the money your husband paid him, and the idea of having to earn money offends him. It always has."

"But—that's ridiculous. Isn't it?"

"Certainly it is." I fought back the impulse to step over and pat her on the shoulder. "But my advice is to humor him, much as I enjoy having you here. Nobody alive can handle him but me. If he came down and found you here he would turn around and walk out. If you have anything special to say,

tell me, and I'll tell him. He'll listen to me because he has to or fire me, and he can't fire me because then he would never do any work at all and would eventually starve to death."

"I shouldn't think—" She stopped and stood up. She took a step toward the door, then turned and said, "I shouldn't think a cold-blooded murder is something to joke about."

I had to fight back the impulse again. "I'm not joking," I declared. "Plain facts. What did you want to say to him?"

"I just wanted a talk with him. He hasn't come to see me. Neither have you." She tried to smile, but all she accomplished was to start her lip quivering. She stopped it. "You haven't even phoned me. I don't know what's happening. The police asked me about two of my hairs being in that box of cigars, and I suppose they have told Mr. Wolfe about it, and I don't even know what he thinks or what he told the police."

I grinned at her. "That's easy. He made a speech to the jury, demonstrating that those hairs in the box were evidence that you did not kill your husband." I went to her and put a hand on her arm, like a brother. "Listen, lady. Isn't the funeral this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Go and have the funeral; that's enough for you for one day. Leave the rest to me. I mean, if any-

thing occurs that it would help you to know about, I'll see that you know. Right?"

She didn't pull anything corny like grasping my hand, with hers firm and warm, or gazing at me with moist eyes filled with trust. She did meet my eyes, but only long enough to say, "Thank you, Mr. Goodwin," and turned to go. I went to the front door and let her out.

After Wolfe came down, the relations between us were nothing to brag about. Apparently he had nothing to offer, and I was too sore to start in on him.

He passed the time until lunch going through catalogues, and at 2:30 P.M., with a veal cutlet and half a bushel of Fritz's best mixed salad stowed in the hold, he returned to the office and resumed the catalogues. That got interrupted before long, but not by me. The bell rang and I went to the front, and it was Saul Panzer.

I took him to the office, where Wolfe greeted him and then told me, "Archie. Go up and help Theodore with the pollen lists."

I did my best with Theodore and the pollen lists, not wanting to take it out on them. The conference with Saul seemed to be comprehensive, since a full hour passed before the house phone in the potting-room buzzed. Theodore answered it, and told me that I was wanted downstairs.

When I got there Saul was gone.

I had a withering remark prepared, thinking to open up with it, but had to save it for some other time. Wolfe was seated behind his desk, leaning back with his eyes closed, and his lips were moving, pushing out and then in again, out and in.

So I sat down and kept my mouth shut. The brain had actually got on the job, and I knew better than to make remarks, withering or not, during the performance of miracles. The first result, which came in ten or twelve minutes after I entered, did not, however, seem to be very miraculous. He opened his eyes halfway, grunted, and muttered, "Archie. Yesterday you showed me an article in a paper about a man's body found in an orchard near White Plains, but I didn't look at it. Now I want it."

"Yes, sir. There was more this morning—"

"Have they identified the body?"

"No, sir. The head was smashed —"

"Get it."

I obeyed. Newspapers were kept in the office for three days. I opened it to the page and handed it to him. He would read a newspaper only one way, holding it out wide open, no folding, with his arms stretched. I had never tried to get him to do it more intelligently because it was the only strenuous exercise he ever got and was therefore good for him. He finished the Thursday piece and asked for Friday's.

Then he told me, "Get the dis-

strict attorney of Westchester County. What's his name? Fraser?"

"Right." I got busy with the phone. I had no trouble getting the office, but then they gave me the usual line about Mr. Fraser being in conference, and I had to put on pressure. Finally the elected person said hello.

Wolfe took it. "How do you do, Mr. Fraser? . . . Nero Wolfe. I have something to give you. That body found in an orchard Wednesday evening with the head crushed—has it been identified?"

Fraser was brusque: "No. What—?"

"Please. I'm giving you something. Put this down: Arthur Howell, 914 West 78th Street, New York. He worked for the Becker Products Corporation of Basston, New Jersey. They have an office at 622 East 42nd Street, New York. His dentist was Lewis Marley, 699 Park Avenue, New York. . . . That should help. Try that. In return for this, I would appreciate it very much if you will have me notified the moment the identification is made. Did you get it all?"

"Yes. But what—?"

"No, sir. That's all. That's all you'll get from me until I get word of the identification."

There was some sputtering protest from the White Plains end, but it accomplished nothing. Wolfe hung up, with a self-satisfied smirk on his big face, cleared his throat and picked up a catalogue.

I growled at him, "So it's in the bag. A complete stranger named Arthur Howell. After snitching the capsules from Becker Products and making the cigars and getting them into Poor's home God knows how, he was overcome by remorse and went to an orchard and took his clothes off and lay down and ran a car over himself—"

"Archie. Shut up. We are ready to act, in any case, but it will make things a little simpler if that corpse proves to be Mr. Howell, so it is worth waiting for a report on it." He glanced at the clock, which said seven minutes to four, and put the catalogue down. "We might as well prepare it now. Get that capsule from the safe."

I thought to myself, "This time it may not miss him, but, as for me, I'm going outdoors."

However, it appeared that he was going to try some new gag instead of repeating with the percolator. By the time I got the capsule from the safe and conveyed it to him, he had taken two articles from a drawer and put them on his desk. One was a roll of Scotch tape. The other was a medium-sized photograph of a man, mounted on gray card-board. I gave it a glance, then picked it up and did a thorough job of looking. It was unquestionably Eugene R. Poor.

"Goody," I said enthusiastically. "No wonder you're pleased. Even if Saul had to pay two hundred bucks for it—"

"Archie. Let me have that. . . . Here, hold this thing."

I helped. What I was to hold was the capsule, flat on the cardboard near a corner, while he tore off a piece of tape and fastened it there. When he lifted the photo and jiggled it to see if the fastening was firm, the thread dangled over Poor's right eye.

"Put it in an envelope and in the safe," he said, then glanced at the clock and made for the elevator.

At six o'clock he returned to the office, rang for Fritz to bring beer, and took up where he had left off with the catalogues. At eight o'clock Fritz summoned us to dinner. At nine-thirty we returned to the office. At a quarter to ten a phone call came from District Attorney Fraser. The body had been identified. It was Arthur Howell. An assistant district attorney and a pair of detectives were on their way to 35th Street to ask Wolfe how come.

Wolfe hung up, leaned back and sighed, and muttered at me, "Archie. You'll have to call on Mrs. Poor. Saul will go with you."

I stared. "Saul?"

"Yes. He's up in my room asleep. He didn't get to bed last night. You will take her that photograph of her husband. You should leave as soon as possible, before that confounded Westchester lawyer gets here. I don't want to see him. Tell Fritz to bolt the door after you go. Ring my room and tell Saul to

come down at once. Then I'll give you your instructions."

The appearance of the living-room in the Poor apartment on 84th Street was not the same as it had been when I had arrived there three evenings before. Not only was there no army of city employees present and no man of the house, with his face gone, huddled on the floor, but the furniture had been moved around. The chair Poor had sat in when he lit his last cigar was gone, probably to the cleaners on account of spots; the table Cramer had used for headquarters had been shifted to the other side of the room; and the radio had been moved to the other end of the couch. Martha Poor was sitting on the couch, and I was on a chair and I had pulled around to face her. She was wearing something that wasn't a bathrobe and wasn't exactly a dress, modest, with sleeves.

"I'm here under orders," I told her. "I said this morning that if anything happened that it would help you to know about I'd see that you knew, but this isn't it. This is different. Nero Wolfe sent me, with orders. I just want to make that clear. Item number one is to hand you this envelope and invite you to look at the contents."

She took it from me. With steady fingers, slow-moving rather than hurried, she opened the flap and pulled out the photograph.

I informed her, "That decoration may look like something by Dali, but it was Nero Wolfe's idea. I am not authorized to discuss it or the picture from any angle, just there it is, except to remark that it is a very good likeness of your husband. I only saw him that one time, the other afternoon at the office, but of course I had a long and thorough look at him. Wednesday we could have sold that photo to a newspaper for a nice amount, but of course we didn't have it Wednesday."

She had put the photo beside her on the couch and was pinching an edge of the cardboard between her index finger and thumbnail, with the nail sinking in. She was looking straight at me. The muscles of her throat had tightened, which no doubt accounted for the change in her voice when she spoke: "Where did you get it?"

I shook my head. "Out of bounds. As I said, I'm under orders. . . . Item number two is just a piece of information to the effect that a man named Saul Panzer is out in the back hall on this floor, standing by the door of the service elevator. Saul is not big, but he just had a nap and is alert. . . . Number three: That naked body found up in Westchester with the head smashed by running a car over it, in an orchard not more than ten minutes' drive from either Monty's Tavern or Blaney's place, has been identified as formerly belonging to a man named Arthur Howell, an

employee of the Becker Products Corporation."

Her eyes hadn't moved. I hadn't even seen the lashes blink. She said, in a faraway voice, "I don't know why you tell me about that. Arthur Howell? Did you say Arthur Howell?"

"Yep, that's right. Howell, Arthur. Head flattened to a pancake, but enough left for the dentist. As for telling you about it, I'm only obeying orders." I glanced at my wrist. "Number four: It is now twenty past ten. At a quarter to eleven I am supposed either to arrive back at the office or phone. If I do neither, Nero Wolfe will phone Inspector Cramer."

She got up and I thought she was going to take hold of me, but all she did was stand in front of me, about eight inches away, looking up at me. She came about up to my chin.

"Archie Goodwin," she said. "You think I'm terrible, don't you? You think I'm an awful woman, bad clear through. Don't you?"

"I'm not thinking, lady. I'm just an errand boy." The funny thing was that if at any moment up to then I had made a list of the ten most beautiful women she would not have been on it.

"You've had lots of experience," she said, her head back to look up at me. "You know what women are like. I knew you did when you put your hand on my arm yesterday. You know I'm a man's wom-

an, but it has to be the right man. Just one man's, forever."

She started to smile, and her lip began to quiver, and she stopped it. "But I didn't find the man until it was too late. I didn't find him until you put your hand on my arm yesterday. You could have had me then, forever yours, you could have me now if anything like that was possible. I mean—we could go away together—now—you wouldn't have to promise anything—only you could find out if you want me forever too—the way I want you—"

She lifted her hand and touched me, just a touch, the tips of her fingers barely brushing my sleeve.

"Listen," I said, with my voice sounding peculiar, so I tried to correct it. "You are extremely good, no question about it, but, as you say, it's too late. You are trying to go to bat when your side already has three out in the ninth, and that's against the rules. I'll hand it to you that you are extremely good. When you turn it on it flows. But in seven minutes, now, Nero Wolfe will phone the police."

She hauled off and smacked me in the face.

"I hate men," she said through her teeth. "God, how I hate men!"

She turned and walked to the bathroom, and closed the door.

I didn't know whether she had gone to fix her hair or what, and I didn't care. Instead of crossing to the window and standing there without breathing, as I had done

before, I sat down on the edge of the couch and did nothing but breathe. I suppose I did actually know what was going to happen. Anyhow, when it happened, when the noise came, not nearly as loud as it had been in Wolfe's office, because the capsule had been inside a metal percolator, I don't think I jumped or even jerked. I did not run, but walked, to the bathroom door and opened it, and entered.

Less than a minute later I went to the back door in the kitchen and opened that, and told Saul Panzer, "All over. She stuck it in her mouth and lit the fuse. You get out. Go and report to Wolfe. I'll phone the cops."

"But you must be—I'll stay—"

"No, go on. Step on it. I feel fine."

At noon the next day, Saturday, I was getting fed up with all the jabber, because I had a question or two I wanted to ask myself. Cramer had come to Nero Wolfe's office prepared to attack from all sides at once, bringing not only Sergeant Purley Stebbins, but also a gang of civilians consisting of Helen Vardis, Joe Groll, and Conroy Blaney. Blaney had not been let in. On that Wolfe would not budge. Blaney was not to enter his house. The others had all been admitted and were now distributed around the office, with Cramer, of course, in the red leather chair. For over half an hour he and Wolfe had been

closer to getting locked in a death grip than I had ever seen them.

Wolfe was speaking. "Then arrest me," he said. "Shut up, get a warrant, and arrest me."

Cramer, having said about all an inspector could say, merely glared.

"Wording the charge would be difficult," Wolfe murmured. When he was maddest he murmured. "I have not withheld evidence, or obstructed justice, or shielded the guilty. I thought it possible that Mrs. Poor, confronted suddenly with that evidence, would collapse and confess."

"Nuts," Cramer said wearily. "How about confronting me with the evidence? Instead of evidence, what you confront me with is another corpse. And I know"—he tapped the chair arm with a stiff finger—"exactly why. The only evidence you had that was worth a damn was that photograph of Arthur Howell. If you had turned it over to me—"

"Nonsense. You already had a photograph of Arthur Howell. The Becker Products Corporation people gave you a picture of their missing employee on Thursday. So they told Saul Panzer when they gave him a duplicate for me. What good would one more picture of Howell do you?"

"Okay," Cramer was in a losing fight and knew it. "But I didn't know that Howell had come to see you on Tuesday with Mrs. Poor, passing himself off as her husband.

Dressed in the same kind of suit and shirt and tie that Poor was wearing that day. Only you knew that."

I put in an entry: "Excuse me, but when you gentlemen finish the shadow-boxing I would like to ask a question." I was looking at Wolfe. "You say you knew Poor wasn't Poor. When and how?"

Of course, Wolfe faked. He sighed as if he was thinking, now, this is going to be an awful bore. Actually, he was always tickled stiff to show how bright he was.

His eyes came to me. "Wednesday evening you told me that Mr. Poor smoked ten to fifteen cigars a day. Thursday Mr. Cramer said the same thing. But the man who came here Tuesday, calling himself Poor, didn't even know how to hold a cigar, let alone smoke one."

"He was nervous."

"If he was he didn't show it, except with the cigar. You saw him. It was a ludicrous performance and he should never have tried it. When I learned that Mr. Poor was a veteran cigar smoker, the only question was who had impersonated him in this office? And the complicity of Mrs. Poor was obvious, especially with the added information, also furnished by Mr. Cramer, that no photograph of Mr. Poor was available. There are photographs of everybody nowadays. Mrs. Poor was an ass. She was supremely an ass when she selected me to bamboozle. She wanted to

establish the assumption that Mr. Blaney was going to kill Mr. Poor. That was intelligent. She did not want to take her counterfeit Mr. Poor to the police, for fear someone there might be acquainted with the real Mr. Poor. That also was intelligent. But it was idiotic to choose me as the victim."

"She hated men," I remarked.

Wolfe nodded. "She must have had a low opinion of men. In order to get what she wanted, which presumably was something like half a million dollars—counting her husband's fortune, the insurance money, and a half-share in the business after Mr. Blaney had been executed for the murder of Mr. Poor—she was willing to kill three men, two by direct action and one indirectly. Incidentally, except for the colossal blunder of picking me, she was not a fool."

"The hell she wasn't," Cramer growled. "With all that trick setup? She was absolutely batty."

"No, sir." Wolfe shook his head. "She was not. Go back over it. She didn't manufacture the trick setup out of her head; she simply used what she had. On a certain day she found herself with these ingredients at hand: One, the hostility between the partners in the business, amply corroborated by such details as Mr. Poor having Miss Vardis spy on Mr. Blaney, and Mrs. Poor, herself, having Mr. Groll do the same. . . . Two, her acquaintance with a man named Arthur Howell who had

access to a supply of explosive capsules capable of concealment in a cigar, and who also sufficiently resembled her husband in build and general appearance, except for the face itself, and she intended to take care of the face.

"Ten of your men, Mr. Cramer, kept at it for a week or so, can probably trace her association with Mr. Howell. They're good at that. Unquestionably, it was those qualifications of Mr. Howell that suggested the details of her plan. She did not, of course, inform him that she hated men. Quite the contrary. She persuaded him to help her kill her husband, offering, presumably, a strong incentive."

"She was good at offering incentives," I declared. "She was good period."

Wolfe nodded. "I admit she was ingenious. . . . By the way, Mr. Groll, did she have an opportunity to conceal those four capsules in that desk calendar?"

"Yes," Joe said. "Helen and I were discussing that. She came there Tuesday to go with Poor to the rodeo, and she could have done it then."

"That was well conceived," Wolfe said approvingly. "That and the hairs in the box of cigars. She was preparing for all contingencies. Neither of those touches was meant for you, Mr. Cramer, but for a jury, in case it ever got to that. She had sense enough to know what a good lawyer could do with complications

of that sort. . . . Will you gentlemen have some beer?"

"No," Cramer said bluntly. "I'll have a question. Poor wasn't here Tuesday afternoon?"

"No, sir. Arthur Howell was."

"Then where was Poor?"

"At the rodeo." Wolfe pushed a button, two pushes for beer. "Again Mrs. Poor was ingenious. Look at her schedule for Tuesday. She went to the Blaney & Poor office—what time, Mr. Groll?"

Helen answered: "She came around noon. They went to lunch together and then were going to the rodeo."

"Thank you. So all she had to do was to make some excuse and see that he went to the rodeo alone. It was an ideal selection—Madison Square Garden, that enormous crowd. Then she met Arthur Howell somewhere near, having arranged for him to be dressed as her husband was dressed, and brought him here. She was driving her car—or her husband's car. They left here a little before five o'clock. Between here and Forty-second Street he got out and went to Grand Central to take a train to White Plains. A woman who could persuade a man to help her kill her husband could surely persuade him to take a train to White Plains."

Fritz brought beer, and Wolfe opened a bottle and poured.

"Then she continued to Fiftieth Street and met her husband as he left the rodeo, and they drove to

Westchester, having an appointment to see Mr. Blaney at his place there. She talked her husband out of that, left him at a place called Monty's Tavern, drove somewhere, probably the White Plains railroad station, met Arthur Howell there as arranged, drove to an isolated spot probably previously selected, turned off the road into an orchard, killed Mr. Howell or knocked him unconscious with whatever she used for that purpose, removed his clothing and ran the car over him to obliterate his face."

A noise came from Helen Varadis. She had obliterated her own face by covering it with her hands. That gave Joe an excuse to touch her, which he did.

"Granted her basic premise," Wolfe went on, "she couldn't very well have been expected to let Arthur Howell continue to live. She would never have had a care-free moment. What if Mr. Goodwin or I had met him on the street? That thought should have occurred to him, but apparently something about Mrs. Poor had made him quit thinking."

He drank beer. "She proceeded. First to Mr. Blaney's place, to make sure, by looking through windows, that he was alone there, so that she could safely say that she had gone to see him and couldn't find him. Again she was providing for all contingencies. If Arthur Howell's body was, after all, identified, known as that of a man who was

with the Becker Products Corporation and had access to those capsules, it would help to have it established that Mr. Blaney had not been at home during the time that Arthur Howell had been killed."

He emptied the glass. "The rest is anticlimax, though, of course, for her it was the grand consummation. She returned to Monty's Tavern, told her husband Mr. Blaney had not been at home, dined with him, drove back to New York and went to their apartment, and got him a nice fresh cigar from a new box. Everything worked perfectly. It sounds more complicated than it really was."

"That receipt you signed," Cramer growled.

"What? Oh. That gave her no difficulty. Arthur Howell gave the

receipt to her, naturally, and she put it in her husband's pocket. That was important. It was probably the first thing she did after the cigar exploded."

"Meanwhile, you've got the five thousand dollars."

"Yes, sir. I have."

"But Poor didn't pay it to you. You never saw Poor. You weren't hired by him. If you want to say Mrs. Poor paid it, do you take money from murderers?"

It was one of Cramer's feeblest attempts to be nasty, certainly not up to his standard.

Wolfe merely poured beer and said, "*Pfui!* Whether Mr. Poor paid me the five thousand or not, he got his money's worth."

Try analyzing the logic of that. I can't.

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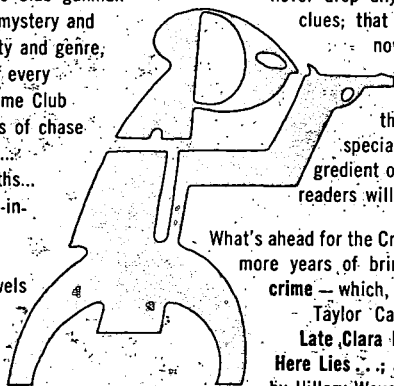
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